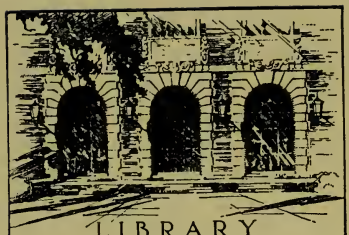

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VIXEN

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET"

ETC. ETC. ETC.

In Three Volumes

VOL. I

LONDON

JOHN AND ROBERT MAXWELL

MILTON HOUSE, SHOE LANE, FLEET STREET

1879

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VIXEN.

CHAPTER I.

A PRETTY HORSEBREAKER.

The moon had newly risen, a late October moon, a pale almost imperceptible crescent, above the dark pine spires in the thicket through which Roderick Vawdrey came, gun in hand, after a long day's rabbit-shooting. It was not his nearest way home, but he liked the broad clearing in the pine wood, which had a ghostly look at dusk, and was so still and lonely that the dart of a squirrel through the fallen leaves seemed a startling event. Here and there a sturdy young oak that had been lately stripped of its bark

lay among the fern, like the naked corpse of a giant. Here and there a tree had been cut down and slung across the track, ready for barking. The ground was soft and spongy, slippery with damp dead leaves, and inclined in a general way to bogginess; but it was ground that Roderick Vawdrey had known all his life, and it seemed more natural to him than any other spot upon mother earth.

On the edge of this thicket there was a broad ditch, with more mud and dead fern in it than water, a ditch strongly suspected of snakes, and beyond the ditch the fence that enclosed Squire Tempest's domain—an old manor house in the heart of the New Forest. It had been an abbey before the Reformation, and was still best known as the Abbey House.

"I wonder whether I'm too late to catch her," speculated Roderick, shifting his bag from one shoulder to the other; "she's no end of fun."

In front of the clearing there was a broad five-barred gate, and beside the gate a keeper's cottage. The flame of a newly-lighted candle

flashed out suddenly upon the autumn dusk, while Roderick stood looking at the gate.

"I'll ask at the lodge," he said; "I should like to say good-bye to the little thing before I go back to Oxford."

He walked quickly on to the gate. The keeper's noisy children were playing at nothing particular just inside it.

"Has Miss Tempest gone for her ride this afternoon?" he asked.

"Ya-ase," drawled the eldest shock-headed youngster.

"And not come back yet?"

"Noa. If she doant take care her'll be bogged."

Roderick hitched his bag on to the top of the gate, and stood at ease waiting. It was late for the little lady of Tempest Manor to be out on her pony: but then it was an understood thing within a radius of ten miles or so that she was a self-willed young person, and even at fifteen years of age had a knack of following her own inclination with that noble disregard of conse-

quences which characterises the heaven-born ruler.

Mr. Vawdrey had not waited more than ten minutes when there came the thud of hoofs upon the soft track, a flash of gray in the distance, something flying over those forky branches sprawling across the way, then a half-sweet, half-shrill call, like a bird's, at which the keeper's children scattered themselves like a brood of scared chickens, and now a rush, and a gray pony shooting suddenly into the air and coming down on the other side of the gate, as if he were a new kind of skyrocket.

"What do you think of that, Rorie?" cried the shrill sweet voice of the gray pony's rider! "Titmouse took the gate in pretty good style, didn't he?"

"I'm ashamed of you, Vixen," said Roderick, "you'll come to a bad end some of these days."

"I don't care if I do, as long as I get my fling first," replied Vixen, tossing her tawny mane.

She was a slim young thing, in a short Lincoln-green habit. She had a small pale face, brown eyes that sparkled with life and mischief, and a

rippling mass of reddish-auburn hair falling down her back under a coquettish little felt hat.

"Hasn't your mamma forbidden jumping, Vixen?" remonstrated Roderick, opening the gate and coming in.

"Yes, that she has, sir," said the old groom, riding up at a jog-trot on his thickset brown cob. "It's quite against Mrs. Tempest's orders, and it's a great responsibility to go out with Miss Violet. She will do it."

"You mean the pony will do it, Bates," cried Vixen. "I don't jump. How can I help it if papa has given me a jumping pony. If I didn't let Titmouse take a gate when he was in the humour, he'd kick like old boots, and pitch me a cropper. It's an instinct of self-preservation that makes me let him jump. And as for poor dear, pretty little mamma," continued Vixen, addressing herself to Roderick, and changing her tone to one of patronising tenderness, "if she had her way, I should be brought up in a little box wrapped in jeweller's wool, to keep me safe. But you see I take after papa, Rorie; and it comes as natural to me to fly

over gates as it does to you to get ploughed for smalls. There, Bates," jumping off the pony, "you may take Titmouse home, and I'll come presently and give him some apples, for he has been a dear, darling, precious treasure of a ponykins."

She emphasised this commendation with a kiss on Titmouse's gray nose, and handed the bridle to Bates.

"I'm going to walk home with Mr. Vawdrey," she said.

"But, Vixen, I can't really," said Roderick; "I'm due at home at this moment, only I couldn't leave without saying good-bye to little Vix."

"And you're over due at Oxford, too, aren't you?" cried Vixen, laughing; "you're always due somewhere—never in the right place. But whether you are due or not, you're coming up to the stables with me to give Titmouse his apples, and then you're coming to dine with us on your last night at home. I insist upon it; papa insists; mamma insists—we all insist."

"My mother will be as angry as——"

"Old boots!" interjected Vixen. "That's the best comparison I know."

"Awfully vulgar for a young lady."

"You taught it me. How can I help being vulgar when I associate with you? You should hear Miss McCroke preach at me—sermons so long"—here Vixen extended her arms to the uttermost—"and I'm afraid they'd make as much impression on Titmouse as they do upon me. But she's a dear old thing, and I love her immensely."

This was Vixen's usual way, making up for all shortcomings with the abundance of her love. The heart was always atoning for the errors of the head.

"I wouldn't be Miss McCroke for anything. She must have a bad time of it with you."

"She has," assented Vixen, with a remorseful sigh; "I fear I'm bringing her sandy hairs with sorrow to the grave. That hair of hers never could be gray, you know, it's too self-opinionated in its sandiness. Now come along, Rorie, do. Titmouse will be stamping about his box like a maniac if he doesn't get those apples."

She gave a little tug with both her small doe-skin-covered hands at Roderick's arm. He was still standing by the gate irresolute, inclination drawing him to the Abbey House, duty calling him home to Briarwood, seven miles off, where his widowed mother was expecting his return.

"My last night at home, Vix," he said remonstrantly; "I really ought to dine with my mother."

"Of course you ought, and that's the very reason why you'll dine with us. So 'Kim over now,' as Bates says to the horses; I don't know what there is for dinner," she added confidentially, "but I feel sure it's something nice. Dinner is papa's particular vanity, you know. He's very weak about dinner."

"Not so weak as he is about you, Vixen."

"Do you really think papa is as fond of me as he is of his dinner?"

"I'm sure of it!"

"Then he must be very fond of me," exclaimed Vixen, with conviction. "Now, are you coming?"

Who could resist those little soft hands in doe-

skin? Certainly not Rorie. He resigned himself to the endurance of his mother's anger in the future as a price to be paid for the indulgence of his inclination in the present, gave Vixen his arm, and turned his face towards the Abbey House.

They walked through shrubberies that would have seemed a pathless wilderness to a stranger, but every turn in which was familiar to these two. The ground was undulating, and vast thickets of rhododendron and azalea rose high above them, or sank in green valleys below their path. Here and there a group of tall firs towered skyward above the dark entanglement of shrubs, or a great beech spread its wide limbs over the hollows; here and there a pool of water reflected the pale moonshine.

The house lay low, sheltered and shut in by those rhododendron thickets, a long rambling pile of building, which had been added to, and altered, and taken away from, and added to again, like that well-known puzzle in mental arithmetic which used to amuse us in our childhood. It was all gables, and chimney-stacks, and odd angles, and ivy-mantled wall, and richly-mullioned windows, or

quaint little diamond-paned lattices, peeping like a watchful eye from under the shadow of a jutting cornice. The stables had been added in Queen Elizabeth's time, after the monks had been routed from their snug quarters, and the Abbey had been bestowed upon one of the Tudor favourites. These Elizabethan stables formed the four sides of a quadrangle, stone paved, with an old marble basin in the centre—a basin which the Vicar pronounced to be an early Saxon font, but which Squire Tempest refused to have removed from the place it had occupied ever since the stables were built. There were curious carvings upon the six sides, but so covered with mosses and lichens that nobody could tell what they meant; and the Squire forbade any scraping process by officious antiquarians, which might lead to somebody's forcible appropriation of the ancient basin.

The Squire was not so modern in his ideas as to set up his own gasometer, so the stables were lighted by lanterns, with an oil-lamp fixed here and there against the wall. Into this dim uncertain light came Roderick and Vixen, through

the deep stone archway which opened from the shrubbery into the stable-yard, and which was solid enough for the gate of a fortified town.

Titmouse's stable was lighted better than the rest. The door stood open, and there was Titmouse, with the neat little quilted doeskin saddle still on his back, waiting to be fed and petted by his young mistress. It was a pretty picture, the old low-ceiled stable, with its wide stalls and roomy loose-boxes, and carpet of plaited straw, golden against the deep brown of the woodwork.

Vixen ran into the box, and took off Titmouse's bridle, he holding down his head, like a child submitting to be undressed. Then, with many vigorous tugs at straps and buckles, and a good deal of screwing up of her rosy lips in the course of the effort, Vixen took off her pony's saddle.

"I like to do everything I can for him," she explained, as Rorie watched her with an amused smile; "I'd wisp him down if they'd let me."

She left the leather panel on Titmouse's back, hung up saddle and bridle, and skipped off to a corn-chest to hunt for apples. Of these she

brought half-a-dozen or so in the skirt of her habit, and then, swinging herself lightly into a comfortable corner of the manger, began to carry out her system of reward for good conduct, with much coquetry on her part and Titmouse's, Rorie watching it all from the empty stall adjoining, his folded arms resting on the top of the partition. He said not another word about his mother, or the duty that called him home to Briarwood, but stood and watched this pretty horsebreaker in a dreamy contentment.

What was Violet Tempest, otherwise Vixen, like, this October evening, just three months before her fifteenth birthday? She made a lovely picture in this dim light, as she sat in the corner of the old manger, holding a rosy-cheeked apple at a tantalising distance from Titmouse's nose: yet she was perhaps not altogether lovely. She was brilliant rather than absolutely beautiful. The white skin was powdered with freckles. The rippling hair was too warm an auburn to escape an occasional unfriendly remark from captious critics; but it was not red hair for all that. The eyes were brownest

of the brown, large, bright, and full of expression. The mouth was a thought too wide, but it was a lovely mouth notwithstanding. The lips were full and firmly moulded—lips that could mean anything, from melting tenderness to sternest resolve. Such lips, a little parted to show the whitest, evenest teeth in Hampshire, seemed to Rorie lovely enough to please the most critical connoisseur of feminine beauty. The nose was short and straight, but had a trick of tilting itself upward with a little impatient jerk that made it seem *retroussé*; the chin was round and full and dimpled; the throat was full and round also, a white column supporting the tawny head, and indicated that Vixen was meant to be a powerful woman, and not one of those ethereal nymphs who lend themselves most readily to the decorative art of a court milliner.

"I'm afraid Violet will be a dreadfully large creature," Mrs. Tempest murmured plaintively, as the girl grew and flourished; that lady herself being ethereal, and considering her own appearance a strictly correct standard of beauty. How could

it be otherwise, when she had been known before her marriage as "the pretty Miss Calthorpe"?

"This is very nice, you know, Vixen," said Roderick critically, as Titmouse made a greedy snap at an apple, and was repulsed with a gentle pat on his nose, "but it can't go on for ever. What'll you do when you are grown up?"

"Have a horse instead of a pony," answered Vixen unhesitatingly.

"And will that be all the difference?"

"I don't see what other difference there can be. I shall always love papa, I shall always love hunting, I shall always love mamma—as much as she'll let me. I shall always have a corner in my heart for dear old Crokey; and, perhaps," looking at him mischievously, "even an odd corner for you. What difference can a few more birthdays make in me? I shall be too big for Titmouse, that's the only misfortune; but I shall always keep him for my pet; and I'll have a basket-carriage and drive him when I go to see my poor people. Sitting behind a pony is an awful bore when one's natural place is on his back, but I'd sooner

endure it than let Titmouse fancy himself superannuated."

"But when you're grown up you'll have to come out, Vixen. You'll be obliged to go to London for a season, and be presented, and go to no end of balls, and ride in the Row, and make a grand marriage, and have a page all to yourself in the *Court Journal*."

"Catch me — going to London!" exclaimed Vixen, ignoring the latter part of the sentence. "Papa hates London, and so do I. And as to riding in Rotten Row, *je voudrais bien me voir faisant cela*," added Vixen, whose study of the French language chiefly resulted in the endeavour to translate English slang into that tongue. "No, when I grow up I shall take papa the tour of Europe. We'll see all those places I'm worried about at lessons—Marathon, Egypt, Naples, the Peloponnesus, *tout le tremblement*—and I shall say to each of them, 'Oh, this is you, is it? What a nuisance you've been to me on the map.' We shall go up Mount Vesuvius, and the Pyramids, and do all sorts of wild things; and by the time I

come home I shall have forgotten the whole of my education."

"If Miss McCroke could hear you!"

"She does, often. You can't imagine the wild things I say to her. But I love her—fondly."

A great bell clanged out with a vigorous peal, that seemed to shake the old stable.

"There's the first bell. I must run and dress. Come to the drawing-room and see mamma."

"But, Vixen, how can I sit down to dinner in such a costume," remonstrated Rorie, looking down at his brown shooting-suit, leather gaiters, and tremendous boots—boots, which, instead of being beautified with blacking, were suppled with tallow; "I can't do it, really."

"Nonsense," cried Vixen, "what does it matter? Papa seldom dresses for dinner. I believe he considers it a sacrifice to mamma's sense of propriety when he washes his hands after coming in from the home farm. And you are only a boy—I beg pardon—an undergraduate. So come along."

"But upon my word, Vixen, I feel too much ashamed of myself."

"I've asked you to dinner, and you've accepted," cried Vixen, pulling him out of the stable by the lapel of his shooting-jacket.

He seemed to relish that mode of locomotion, for he allowed himself to be pulled all the way to the hall-door, and into the glow of the great beech-wood fire; a ruddy light which shone upon many a sporting trophy, and reflected itself on many a gleaming pike and cuirass, belonging to days of old, when gentlemanly sport for the most part meant man-hunting.

It was a fine old vaulted hall, a place to love and remember lovingly when far away. The walls were all of darkly bright oak panelling, save where here and there a square of tapestry hung before a door, or a painted window let in the moonlight. At one end there was a great arched fireplace, the arch surmounted with Squire Tempest's armorial bearings, roughly cut in freestone. A mailed figure of the usual stumpy build, in helm and hauberk, stood on each side of the hearth; a large three-cornered chair covered with stamped and gilded leather was drawn up to the fireside,

the Squire's favourite seat on an autumn or winter afternoon. The chair was empty now, but, stretched at full length before the blazing logs, lay the Squire's chosen companion, Nip, a powerful liver-coloured pointer; and beside him, in equally luxurious rest, reclined Argus, Vixen's mastiff. There was a story about Vixen and the mastiff, involving the only incident in that young lady's life the recollection whereof could make her blush.

The dog, apparently coiled in deepest slumber, heard the light footsteps on the hall floor, pricked up his tawny ears, sprang to his feet, and bounded over to his young mistress, whom he nearly knocked down in the warmth of his welcome. Nip, the pointer, blinked at the intruders, yawned desperately, stretched himself a trifle longer, and relapsed into slumber.

"How fond that brute is of you," said Rorie; "but it's no wonder, when one considers what you did for him."

"If you say another word I shall hate you," cried Vixen savagely.

"Well, but you know when a fellow fights

another fellow's battles, the other fellow's bound to be fond of him; and when a young lady pitches into a bird-boy with her riding-whip to save a mastiff pup from ill-usage, that mastiff pup is bound——"

"Mamma," cried Vixen, flinging aside a tapestry *portière*, and bouncing into the drawing-room, "here's Roderick, and he's come to dinner, and you must excuse his shooting-dress, please. I'm sure pa will."

"Certainly, my dear Violet," replied a gentle *trainante* voice from the fire-lit dimness near the velvet-curtained hearth. "Of course I am always glad to see Mr. Vawdrey when your papa asks him. Where did you meet the Squire, Roderick?"

"Upon my word, Mrs. Tempest," faltered Rorie, coming slowly forward into the ruddy glow, "I feel quite awfully ashamed of myself; I've been rabbit-shooting, and I'm a most horrid object. It wasn't the Squire asked me to stay. It was Vixen."

Vixen made a ferocious grimace at him—he could just see her distorted countenance in the

firelight—and further expressed her aggravation by a smart crack of her whip.

"Violet, my love, you have such startling ways," exclaimed Mrs. Tempest, with a long-suffering air. "Really, Miss McCroke, you ought to try and correct her of those startling ways."

On this Roderick became aware of a stout figure in a tartan dress, knitting industriously on the side of the hearth opposite Mrs. Tempest's sofa. He could just see the flash of those active needles, and could just hear Miss McCroke murmur placidly that she had corrected Violet, and that it was no use.

Rorie remembered that plaid poplin dress when he was at Eton. It was a royal Stuart, too brilliant to be forgotten. He used to wonder whether it would ever wear out, or whether it was not made of some indestructible tissue, like asbestos —a fabric that neither time nor fire could destroy.

"It was Rorie's last night, you see, mamma," apologised Vixen, "and I knew you and papa would like him to come, and that you wouldn't

mind his shooting-clothes a bit, though they do make him look like the under-keeper, except that the under-keeper's better looking than Rorie, and has finished growing his whiskers, instead of living in the expectation of them."

And, with this Parthian shot, Vixen made a pirouette on her neat little morocco-shod toes, and whisked herself out of the room; leaving Roderick Vawdrey to make the best of his existence for the next twenty minutes with the two women he always found it most difficult to get on with, Mrs. Tempest and Miss McCroke.

The logs broke into a crackling blaze just at this moment, and lighted up that luxurious hearth and the two figures beside it.

It was the prettiest thing imaginable in the way of a drawing-room, that spacious low-ceiled chamber in the Abbey House.

The oak panelling was painted white, a barbarity on the part of those modern Goths the West End decorators, but a charming background for quaint Venetian mirrors, hanging shelves of curious old china, dainty little groups of richly-

bound duodecimos, brackets, bronzes, freshest flowers in majolica jars; water-colour drawings by Hunt, Prout, Cattermole, and Edward Duncan; sage-green silk curtains; black and gold furniture, and all the latest prettinesses of the new Jacobean school. The mixture of real mediævalism and modern quaintness was delightful. One hardly knew where the rococo began or the mediæval left off. The good old square fireplace, with its projecting canopy, and columns in white and coloured marbles, was as old as the days of Inigo Jones; but the painted tiles, with their designs from the Iliad and Odyssey after Dante Rossetti, were the newest thing from Minton's factory.

Even Rorie felt that the room was pretty, though he did above all things abhor to be trapped in it, as he found himself this October evening.

"There's a great lot of rubbish in it," he used to say of Mrs. Tempest's drawing-room, "but it's rather nice altogether."

Mrs. Tempest, at five-and-thirty, still retained the good looks which had distinguished Miss Calthorpe at nineteen. She was small and slim,

with a delicate complexion. She had large soft eyes of a limpid innocent azure, regular features, rosebud lips, hands after Velasquez, and an unexceptionable taste in dress, the selection of which formed one of the most onerous occupations of her life. To attire herself becomingly, and to give the Squire the dinners he best liked, in an order of succession so dexterously arranged as never to provoke satiety, were Mrs. Tempest's cardinal duties. In the intervals of her life she read modern poetry, unobjectionable French novels, and reviews. She did a little high-art needle-work, played Mendelssohn's lieder, sang three French *chansons* which her husband liked, slept, and drank orange pekoe. In the consumption of this last article Mrs. Tempest was as bad as a dram-drinker. She declared her inability to support life without that gentle stimulant, and required to be wound up at various hours of her languid day with a dose of her favourite beverage.

"I think I'll take a cup of tea," was Mrs. Tempest's inevitable remark at every crisis of her existence.

"And so you are going back to Oxford, Roderick?" the lady began with a languid kindness.

Mrs. Tempest had never been known to be unkind to anyone. She regarded all her fellow-creatures with a gentle tolerance. They were there, a necessary element of the universe, and she bore with them. But she had never attached herself particularly to anybody except the Squire. Him she adored. He took all the trouble of life off her hands, and gave her all good things. She had been poor, and he had made her rich; nobody, and he had elevated her into somebody. She loved him with a canine fidelity, and felt towards him as a dog feels towards his master—that in him this round world begins and ends.

"Yes," assented Rorie, with a sigh, "I'm going up to-morrow."

"Why up?" inquired Miss McCroke, without lifting her eyes from her needles. "It isn't up on the map."

"I hope you are going to get a grand degree," continued Mrs. Tempest, in that soft con-

ciliatory voice of hers; "Senior Wrangler, or something."

"That's the other shop," exclaimed Rorie; "they grow that sort of timber at Cambridge. However, I hope to pull myself through somehow or other this time, for my mother's sake. She attaches a good deal of importance to it, though for my own part I can't see what good it can do me. It won't make me farm my own land better, or ride straighter to hounds, or do my duty better to my tenants."

"Education," said Miss McCroke sententiously, "is always a good, and we cannot too highly estimate its influence upon——"

"Oh yes, I know," answered Rorie quickly, for he knew that when the floodgates of Miss McCroke's eloquence were once loosened the tide ran strong, "when house and lands are gone and spent a man may turn usher in an academy, and earn fifty pounds a year and his laundress's bill by grinding Cæsar's Commentaries into small boys. But I shouldn't lay in a stock of learning with that view. When my house and lands are gone I'll go after

them—emigrate, and go into the lumber trade in Canada."

"What a dreadful idea," said Mrs. Tempest; "but you are not going to lose house and lands, Roderick—such a nice place as Briarwood."

"To my mind it's rather a commonplace hole," answered the young man carelessly, "but the land is some of the best in the county."

It must be nearly seven by this time, he thought. He was getting through this period of probation better than he had expected. Mrs. Tempest gave a little stifled yawn behind her huge black fan, upon which Cupids and Graces, lightly sketched in French gray, were depicted dancing in the airiest attitudes, after Boucher. Roderick would have liked to yawn in concert, but at this juncture a sudden ray of light flashed upon him and showed him a way of escape.

"I think I'll go to the gentleman's room, and make myself decent before the second bell rings," he said.

"Do," assented Mrs. Tempest, with another yawn; and the young man fled.

He had only time to scramble through a hurried toilet, and was still feeling very doubtful as to the parting of his short crisp hair, when the gong boomed out its friendly summons. The gentleman's room opened from the hall, and Rorie heard the Squire's loud and jovial voice uplifted as he raised the tapestry curtain.

Mr. Tempest was standing in front of the log fire, pulling Vixen's auburn hair. The girl had put on a picturesque brown velvet frock. A scarlet sash was tied loosely round her willowy waist, and a scarlet ribbon held back the rippling masses of her bright hair.

"A study in red and brown," thought Rorie, as the fire-glow lit up the picture of the Squire in his hunting-dress, and the girl in her warm velvet gown.

"Such a run, Rorie," cried the Squire; "we dawdled about among the furze from twelve till four doing nothing, and just as it was getting dark started a stag up on the high ground this side of Pickett's Post, and ran him nearly into Ringwood. Go in and fetch my wife, Rorie. Oh, here she is"

—as the *portière* was lifted by a white hand, all a-glitter with diamonds—"you must excuse me sitting down in pink to day, Pamela; I only got in as the gong began to sound, and I'm as hungry as the proverbial hunter."

"You know I always think you handsomest in your scarlet coat, Edward," replied the submissive wife, "but I hope you're not very muddy."

"I won't answer for myself; but I haven't been actually up to my neck in a bog."

Rorie offered his arm to Mrs. Tempest, and they all went in to dinner, the Squire still playing with his daughter's hair, and Miss McCroke solemnly bringing up the rear.

The dining-room at the Abbey House was the ancient refectory, large enough for a mess-room; so, when there were no visitors, the Tempests dined in the library—a handsome square room, in which old family portraits looked down from the oak panelling above the dwarf bookcases, and where the literary element was not obtrusively conspicuous. You felt that it was a room quite as well adapted for conviviality as for study. There

was a cottage piano in a snug corner by the fireplace. The Squire's capacious arm-chair stood on the other side of the hearth, Mrs. Tempest's low chair and gipsy table facing it. The old oak buffet opposite the chimney-piece was a splendid specimen of Elizabethan carving, and made a rich background for the Squire's racing-cups, and a pair of Oliver Cromwell tankards, battered and dinted with much service, and unornamental as that illustrious Roundhead himself.

It was a delightful room on a chill October evening like this; the logs roaring up the wide chimney, a pair of bronze candelabra lighting buffet and table, Mrs. Tempest smiling pleasantly at her unbidden guest, and the Squire stooping, red-faced and plethoric, over his mulligatawny; while Vixen, who was at an age when dinner is a secondary consideration, was amusing herself with the dogs, gentlemanly animals, too well bred to be importunate in their demands for an occasional tit-bit, and content to lie in superb attitudes, looking up at the eaters patiently, with supplication in their great pathetic brown eyes.

"Rorie is going up to-morrow—not in a balloon, but to Magdalen College, Oxford—so, as this was his last night, I made him come to dinner," explained Vixen presently. "I hope I didn't do wrong."

"Rorie knows he's always welcome. Have some more of that mulligatawny, my lad, it's uncommonly good."

Rorie declined the mulligatawny, being at this moment deeply engaged in watching Vixen and the dogs. Nip, the liver-coloured pointer, was performing his celebrated statue feat. With his forelegs stiffly extended, and his head proudly poised, he simulated a dog of marble; and if it had not been for the occasional bumping of his tail upon the Persian carpet, in an irresistible wag of self-approbation, the simulation would have been perfect.

"Look, papa! isn't it beautiful? I went out of the room the other day, while Nip was doing the statue, after I'd told him not to move a paw, and I stayed away quite five minutes, and then stole quietly back; and there he was, lying as still as

if he'd been carved out of stone. Wasn't that fidelity?"

"Nonsense!" cried the Squire. "How do you know that Nip didn't wind you as you opened the door, and get himself into position? What are these?" as the old silver *entrée* dishes came round. "Stewed eels? You never forget my tastes, Pamela."

"Stewed eels, sir; *sole maître d'hôtel*," said the butler, in the usual suppressed and deferential tone.

Rorie helped himself automatically, and went on looking at Vixen.

Her praises of Nip had kindled jealous fires in the breast of Argus, her own particular favourite; and the blunt black muzzle had been thrust vehemently under her velvet sleeve.

"Argus is angry," said Rorie.

"He's a dear old foolish thing to be jealous," answered Vixen, "when he knows I'd go through fire and water for him."

"Or even fight a big boy," cried the Squire, throwing himself back in his chair with the unctuous laughter of a man who is dining well, and knows it.

Vixen blushed rosiest red at the allusion.

"Papa, you oughtn't to say such things," she cried; "I was a little bit of a child then."

"Yes, and flew at a great boy of fourteen and licked him," exclaimed the Squire rapturously. "You know the story, don't you, Rorie?"

Rorie had heard it twenty times, but looked the picture of ignorant expectancy.

"You know how Vixen came by Argus? What, you don't? Well, I'll tell you. This little yellow-haired lass of mine was barely nine years old, and she was riding through the village on her pony, with young Stubbs behind her on the sorrel mare—and, you know, to her dying day, that sorrel would never let anyone dismount her quietly. Now what does Vixen spy but a lubberly lad and a lot of small children ill-using a mastiff pup. They'd tied a tin-kettle to the brute's tail, and were doing their best to drown him. There's a pond just beyond Mrs. Farley's cottage, you know, and into that pond they'd pelted the puppy, and wouldn't let him get out of it. As fast as the poor little brute

scrambled up the muddy bank they drove him back into the water."

"Papa darling," pleaded Vixen despairingly, "Rorie has heard it all a thousand times before. Haven't you now, Rorie?"

"It's as new to me as to-morrow's *Times*," said Roderick with effrontery.

"Vixen was off the pony before you could say 'Jack Robinson.' She flew into the midst of the dirty little ragamuffins, seized the biggest ruffian by the collar, and trundled him backwards into the pond. Then she laid about her right and left with her whip till the little wretches scampered off, leaving Vixen and the puppy masters of the situation; and by this time the sorrel mare had allowed Stubbs to get off her, and Stubbs rushed to the rescue. The young ringleader had been too much surprised by his ducking to pull himself together again before this, but he came up to time now, and had it out with Stubbs, while the sorrel was doing as much damage as she conveniently could to Mrs. Farley's palings. 'Don't quite kill him, please, Stubbs,' cried Vixen, 'although he

richly deserves it;' and then she took the muddy little beast up in her arms and ran home, leaving her pony to fate and Stubbs. Stubbs told me the whole story, with tears in his eyes. 'Who'd ha' thought, Squire, the little lady would ha' been such a game 'un?' said Stubbs."

"It's very horrid of you, papa, to tell such silly old stories," remonstrated Vixen. "That was nearly seven years ago, and Dr. Dewsnap told us the other day that everybody undergoes a complete change of—what is it?—all the tissues —in seven years. I'm not the same Vixen that pushed the boy into the pond. There's not a bit of her left in me."

And so the dinner went on and ended, with a good deal of distraction, caused by the dogs, and a mild little remark now and then from Mrs. Tempest, or an occasional wise interjection from Miss McCroke, who in a manner represented the Goddess of Wisdom in this somewhat frivolous family, and came in with a corrective and severely rational observation when the talk was drifting towards idiocy.

The filberts, bloomy purple grapes, and ruddy pippins, and yellow William pears had gone their rounds—all home produce—and had been admired and praised, and the Squire's full voice was mellowing after his second glass of port, when the butler came in with a letter on a salver, and carried it, with muffled footfall and solemn visage, as of one entrusted with the delivery of a death-warrant, straight to Roderick Vawdrey.

The young man looked at it as if he had encountered an unexpected visitor of the adder tribe.

"My mother," he faltered.

It was a large and handsome letter with a big red seal.

"May I?" asked Rorie, with a troubled visage, and having received his host and hostess's assent, broke the seal.

"Dear Roderick,—Is it quite kind of you to absent yourself on this your last night at home? I feel very sure that this will find you at the Abbey House, and I send the brougham at a

venture. Be good enough to come home at once. The Dovedales arrived at Ashbourne quite unexpectedly this afternoon, and are dining with me on purpose to see you before you go back to Oxford. If your own good feeling did not urge you to spend this last evening with me, I wonder that Mr. and Mrs. Tempest were not kind enough to suggest to you which way your duty lay.—Yours anxiously,

"JANE VAWDREY."

Roderick crumpled the letter with an angry look. That fling at the Tempests hit him hard. Why was it that his mother was always so ready to find fault with these chosen friends of his?

"Anything wrong, Rorie?" asked the Squire.

"Nothing; except that the Dovedales are dining with my mother, and I'm to go home directly."

"If you please, ma'am, Master Vawdrey's servant has come for him," said Vixen, mimicking the style of announcement at a juvenile party. "It's quite too bad, Rorie," she went on, "I had made up my mind to beat you at pyramids. How-

ever, I daresay you're very glad to have the chance of seeing your pretty cousin before you leave Hampshire."

But Rorie shook his head dolefully, made his adieux, and departed.

CHAPTER II.

LADY JANE VAWDREY.

"It is not dogs only that are jealous!" thought Roderick, as he went home in the brougham, with the windows down, and the cool night breeze blowing his cigar smoke away into the forest, to mix with the mist wreaths that were curling up from the soft ground. It was an offence of the highest grade to smoke in his mother's carriage; but Rorie was in an evil temper just now, and found a kind of bitter pleasure in disobedience.

The carriage bowled swiftly along the straight, well-made road, but Rorie hated riding in a brougham. The soft padded confinement galled him.

"Why couldn't she send me my dog-cart?" he asked himself indignantly.

Briarwood was a large white house in a small park. It stood on much higher ground than the

Abbey House, and was altogether different from that good old relic of a bygone civilisation. Briarwood was distinctly modern. Its decorations savoured of the Regency; its furniture was old-fashioned, without being antique. The classic stiffness and straightness of the First French Empire distinguished the gilded chairs and tables in the drawing-room. There were statues by Chantrey and Canova in the spacious lofty hall; portraits by Lawrence and Romney in the dining-room; a historical picture by Copley over the elephantine mahogany sideboard; a Greek sarcophagus for wines under it.

At its best, the Briarwood house was commonplace; but to the mind of Lady Jane Vawdrey, the gardens and hot-houses made amends. She was a profound horticulturist, and spent half her income on orchids and rare newly-imported flowers; and by this means she had made Briarwood one of the show places of the neighbourhood.

"A woman must be distinguished for something, or she is no better than her scullery-maid," said Lady Jane to her son, excusing herself for

these extravagances. "I have no talent for music, painting, or poetry, so I devote myself to orchids; and perhaps my orchids turn out better than many people's music and poetry."

Lady Jane was not a pleasant-tempered woman, and enjoyed the privilege of being more feared than liked; a privilege of which she made the most, and which secured her immunity from many annoyances to which good-natured people are subject. She did good to her poor neighbours, in her own cold set way, but the poor people about Briarwood did not send to her for wine and brandy as if she kept a public-house, and was benefited by their liberal patronage; the curate at the little Gothic church, down in the tiny village in a hollow of the wooded hills, did not appeal to Lady Jane in his necessities for church or parish. She subscribed handsomely to all orthodox well-established charities, but was not prone to accidental benevolence. Nobody ever disappointed her when she gave a dinner, or omitted the duty-call afterwards; but she had no unceremonious gatherings, no gossipy kettle-drums, no hastily-arranged pic-

nics or garden-parties. When people in the neighbourhood wanted to take their friends to see the orchids, they wrote to Lady Jane first, and made it quite a state affair; and on an appointed afternoon, the lady of Briarwood received them, richly clad in a dark velvet gown and a point-lace cap, as if she had just walked out of an old picture, and there were three or four gardeners in attendance to open doors, and cut specimen blossoms for the guests.

"She's a splendid woman, admirable in every way," said Roderick to an Oxford chum, with whom he had been discussing Lady Jane's virtues; "but if a fellow could have a voice in the matter, she's not the mother I should have chosen for myself."

Ambition was the leading characteristic of Lady Jane's mind. As a girl, she had been ambitious for herself, and that ambition had been disappointed; as a woman, her ambition transferred itself to her son. She was the eldest daughter of the Earl of Lodway, a nobleman who had been considerably overweighted in the handicap of life, having nine children, seats in three counties, a huge old house

in St. James's Square, and a small income—his three estates consisting of some of the barrenest and most unprofitable land in Great Britain. Of Lord Lodway's nine children, five were daughters, and of these Lady Jane was the eldest and the handsomest. Even in her nursery she had a very distinct notion that, for her, marriage meant promotion. She used to play at being married at St. George's, Hanover Square, and would never consent to have the ceremony performed by less than two bishops; even though the part of one hierarch had to be represented by the nursery hearth-broom. In due course Lady Jane Umleigh made her *début* in society, in all the bloom and freshness of her stately Saxon beauty. She was admired and talked about, and acknowledged as one of the belles of that season; her portrait was engraved in the Book of Beauty, and her ball programmes were always filled with the very best names; but at the end of the season, Lady Lodway went back to the Yorkshire Wolds with a biting sense of failure and mortification. Her handsome daughter had not sent her arrow home to the gold.

Lady Jane had not received a single offer worth talking about.

"Don't you think you could consent to be married by one bishop and a dean, Jenny, if the Marquis comes to the scratch soon after the twelfth?" asked Lady Jane's youngest brother derisively.

He had been made to do bishop in those play-weddings of Lady Jane's, very often when the function went against the grain.

The Marquis thus familiarly spoken about was Lord Strishfogel, the richest nobleman in Ireland, and a great sea-rover, famous for his steam yachts, and his importance generally. He had admired Lady Jane's statuesque beauty, and had been more particular in his attentions than the rest of her satellites, who for the most part merely worshipped her because it was the right thing to do. Lord Strishfogel had promised to come to Heron's Nest, Lord Lodway's place in the Wolds, for the grouse-shooting; but instead of keeping his promise, this erratic young peer went off to the Golden Horn, to race his yacht against the vessel of a great Turkish

official. This was Lady Jane Umleigh's first disappointment. She had liked Lord Strishfogel just well enough to fancy herself deeply in love with him, and she was unconscious of the influence his rank and wealth had exercised upon her feelings. She had thought of herself so often as the Marchioness of Strishfogel, had so completely projected her mind into that brilliant future, that to descend from this giddy height to the insignificance of unwedded girlhood was as sharp a fall as if she had worn a crown and lost it.

Her second season began, and Lord Strishfogel was still a rover. He was in the South Seas by this time, writing a book, and enjoying halcyon days among the friendly natives, swimming like a dolphin in those summery seas, and indulging in harmless flirtations with dusky princesses, whose chief attire was made of shells and flowers, and whose untutored dancing was more vigorous than refined. At the end of that second season, Jane Umleigh had serious thoughts of turning philanthropist, and taking a shipload of destitute young women to Australia. Anything would be better

than this sense of a wasted life and ignominious failure.

She was in this frame of mind when Mr. Vawdrey came to Heron's Nest for the shooting. He was a commoner, but his family was one of the oldest in Hampshire, and he had lately distinguished himself by some rather clever speeches in the House of Commons. His estate was worth fifteen thousand a year, and he was altogether a man of some mark. Above all, he was handsome, manly, and a gentleman to the marrow of his bones, and he was the first man who ever fell over head and ears in love with Jane Umleigh.

The charms that had repelled more frivolous admirers attracted John Vawdrey. That proud, calm beauty of Lady Jane's seemed to his mind the perfection of womanly grace. Here was a wife for a man to adore upon his knees, a wife to be proud of, a wife to rule her vassals like a queen, and to lead him, John Vawdrey, on to greatness.

He was romantic, chivalrous, aspiring, and Lady Jane Umleigh was the first woman he had met who embodied the heroine of his youthful dreams.

He proposed and was refused, and went away despairing. It would have been a good match, undoubtedly—a truth which Lord and Lady Lodway urged with some iteration upon their daughter—but it would have been a terrible descent from the ideal marriage which Lady Jane had set up in her own mind, as the proper prize for so fair a runner in life's race. She had imagined herself a marchioness, with a vast territory of mountain, vale, and lake, and an influence in the sister island second only to that of royalty. She could not descend all at once to behold herself the wife of a plain country gentleman, whose proudest privilege it was to write M.P. after his name.

The Earl and Countess were urgent, for they had another daughter ready for the matrimonial market, and were inclined to regard Lady Jane as an "old shopkeeper," but they knew their eldest daughter's temper, and did not press the matter too warmly.

Another season, Lady Jane's fourth, and Lady Sophia's first, began and ended. Lady Sophia was piquant and witty, with a snub nose and a playful disposition. She was a first-rate horsewoman, an

exquisite waltzer, good at croquet, archery, billiards, and all games requiring accuracy of eye and aim, and Lady Sophia brought down her bird in a single season. She went home to Heron's Nest a duchess in embryo. The Duke of Dovedale, a bulky, middle-aged nobleman, with a passion for field sports and high farming, had seen Lady Sophia riding a dangerous horse in Rotten Row, and had been so charmed by her management of the brute, as to become from that hour her slave. A pretty girl, with such a seat in her saddle, and such a light hand for a horse's mouth, was the next best thing to a goddess. Before the season was over the Duke had proposed, and had been graciously accepted by the young lady, who felt an inward glow of pride at having done so much better than the family beauty.

"Can I ever forget how that girl Jane has snubbed me?" said Lady Sophia to her favourite brother. "And to think that I shall be sitting in ermine robes in the House of Lords, while she is peeping through the nasty iron fretwork in the Ladies' Gallery to catch a glimpse of the top of her husband's head in the House of Commons."

This splendid engagement of Lady Sophia's turned the tide for the faithful John Vawdrey. Lady Jane met her rejected lover at Trouville, and was so gracious to him that he ventured to renew his suit, and, to his delighted surprise, was accepted. Anything was better than standing out in the cold while the ducal engagement was absorbing everybody's thoughts and conversation. Lady Sophia had boasted, in that playful way of hers, of having her beauty-sister for chief bridesmaid; and the beauty-sister had made up her mind that this thing should not be. Perhaps she would have married a worse man than John Vawdrey to escape such infamy.

And John Vawdrey was by no means disagreeable to her; nay, it had been pride, and not any disinclination for the man himself that had bidden her reject him. He was clever, distinguished, and he loved her with a romantic devotion which flattered and pleased her. Yes, she would marry John Vawdrey.

Everybody was delighted at this concession, the lady's parents and belongings most especially

so. Here were two daughters disposed of; and if the beauty had made the inferior match, it was only one of those capricious turns of fortune that are more to be expected than the common order of things.

So there was a double marriage the following spring at St. George's, and Lady Jane's childish desire was gratified. There were two bishops at the ceremony. True that one was only colonial, and hardly ranked higher than the nursery hearth-brush.

Fate was not altogether unkind to Lady Jane. Her humble marriage was much happier than her sister's loftier union. The Duke, who had been so good-natured as a lover, proved stupid and somewhat tiresome as a husband. He gave his mind to hunting and farming, and cared for nothing else. His chief conversation was about cattle and manure, guano and composts, the famous white Chillingham oxen, or the last thing in strawberry roans. He spent a small fortune—a fortune that would have been large for a small man—in the attempt to acclimatise strange animals in his park

in the Midlands. Sophia, Duchess of Dovedale, had seven country seats, and no home. Her children were puny and feeble. They sickened in the feudal Scotch castle, they languished in the Buckinghamshire Eden—a freestone palace set among the woods that overhang the valley of the Thames. No breezes that blow could waft strength or vitality to those feeble lungs. At thirty the Duchess of Dovedale had lost all her babies, save one frail sapling, a girl of two years old, who promised to have a somewhat better constitution than her perished brothers and sisters. On this small paragon the Duchess concentrated her cares and hopes. She gave up hunting—much to the disgust of that Nimrod, her husband—in order to superintend her nursery. From the most pleasure-loving of matrons, she became the most domestic. Lady Mabel Ashbourne was to grow up the perfection of health, wisdom, and beauty, under the mother's loving care. She would have a great fortune, for there was a considerable portion of the Duke's property which he was free to bequeath to his daughter. He had coal-pits in the

North, and a tin-mine in the West. He had a house at Kensington which he had built for himself, a model Queen Anne mansion, with every article of furniture made on the strictest æsthetic principles, and not an anachronism from the garrets to the cellars. You might have expected to meet Marlborough on the stairs, and to find Addison reading in the library. The Scottish castle and the Buckinghamshire Paradise would go with the title; but the Duke, delighted with the easy-going sport of the New Forest, had bought six hundred acres between Stony Cross and Romsey—a wide stretch of those low level pastures across which you see the distant roofs and spires of the good old market town—and had made for himself an archetypal home-farm, and had built himself a hunting-box, with stables and kennels of the most perfect kind; and this estate, together with the Queen Anne house, and the pits and the mine, was his very own to dispose of as he pleased.

Lady Jane's marriage had proved happy. Her husband, always egged on by her ambitious promptings, had made himself an important figure in the

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senate, and had been on the eve of entering the Cabinet as Colonial Secretary, when death cut short his career. A hard winter and a sharp attack of bronchitis nipped the aspiring senator in the bud.

Lady Jane was as nearly broken-hearted as so cold a woman could be. She had loved her husband better than anything in this life, except herself. He left her with one son and a handsome jointure, with the full possession of Briarwood until her son's majority. Upon that only child Lady Jane lavished all her care, but did not squander the wealth of her affection. Perhaps her capacity for loving had died with her husband. She had been proud and fond of him, but she was not proud of the little boy in velvet knickerbockers, whose good looks were his only merit, and who was continually being guilty of some new piece of mischief; laming ponies, smashing orchids, glass, china, and generally disturbing the perfect order which was Briarwood's first law.

When the boy was old enough to go to Eton, he seemed still more remote from his mother's love and sympathy. He was passionately fond of

field sports, and those Lady Jane Vawdrey detested. He was backward in all his studies, despite the careful coaching he had received from the mild Anglican curate of Briarwood village. He was intensely pugilistic, and rarely came home for the holidays without bringing a black eye or a swollen nose as the result of his latest fight. He spent a good deal of money, and in a manner that to his mother's calm sense appeared simply idiotic. His hands were always grubby, his nails wore almost perpetual mourning, his boots were an outrage upon good taste, and he generally left a track of muddy footmarks behind him along the crimson-carpeted corridors. What could any mother do for such a boy, except tolerate him? Love was out of the question. How could a delicate, high-bred woman, soft-handed, velvet-robed, care to have such a lad about her? a boy who smelt of stables and wore hob-nailed boots, whose pockets were always sticky with toffee, and his handkerchiefs a disgrace to humanity, who gave his profoundest thoughts to pigeon-fancying, and his warmest affections to ratting terriers, nay, who was capable of

having a live rat in his pocket at any moment of his life.

But while all these habits made the lad abominable in the eyes of his mother, the Duke and Duchess of Dovedale admired the young Hercules with a fond and envious admiration. The Duke would have given coal-pits and tin-mine, all the disposable property he held, and deemed it but a small price for such a son. The Duchess thought of her feeble boy-babies who had been whooping-coughed or scarlet-fevered out of the world, and sighed, and loved her nephew better than ever his mother had loved him since his babyhood. When the Dovedales were at their place in the Forest, Roderick almost lived with them; or, at any rate, divided his time between Ashbourne Park and the Abbey House, and spent as little of his life at home as he could. He patronised Lady Mabel, who was his junior by five years, rode her thoroughbred pony for her, under the pretence of improving its manners, until he took a header with it into a bog, out of which pony and boy rolled and struggled indiscriminately, boy none the worse,

pony lamed for life. He played billiards with the Duke, and told the Duchess all his school adventures, practical jokes, fights, apple-pie beds, booby-traps, surreptitious fried sausages, and other misdemeanours.

Out of this friendship arose a brilliant vision which reconciled Lady Jane Vawdrey to her son's preference for his aunt's house and his aunt's society. Why should he not marry Mabel by-and-by, and unite the two estates of Ashbourne and Briarwood, and become owner of the pits and the mine, and distinguish himself in the senate, and be created a peer? As the husband of Lady Mabel Ashbourne, he would be rich enough to command a peerage, almost as a right; but his mother would have had him deserve it. With this idea Lady Jane urged on her son's education. All his Hampshire friends called him clever, but he won no laurels at school. Lady Jane sent for grinders and had the boy ground; but all the grinding could not grind a love of classics or metaphysics into this free son of the forest. He went to Oxford, and got himself ploughed for his Little Go, with a wonderful

facility. For politics he cared not a jot, but he could drive tandem better than any other undergraduate of his year. He never spoke at the Union, but he pulled stroke in the 'Varsity boat. He was famous for his biceps, his good-nature, and his good looks; but so far he had distinguished himself for nothing else, and to this stage of non-performance had he come when the reader first beheld him.

CHAPTER III.

"I WANT A LITTLE SERIOUS TALK WITH YOU."

It was only half-past nine when the brougham drove up to the pillared porch at Briarwood. The lighted drawing-room windows shone out upon the vaporous autumn darkness—a row of five tall French casements—and the sound of a piano caught Roderick's ear as he tossed the end of his cigar into the shubbery, and mounted the wide stone door-steps.

"At it again," muttered Rorie with a shrug of disgust, as he entered the hall, and heard, through the half-open drawing-room door, an interlacement of pearly runs. At this stage of his existence, Rorie had no appreciation of brilliant pianoforte playing. The music he liked best was of the simplest, most inartificial order.

"Are the Duke and Duchess here?" he asked the butler.

"Her Grace and Lady Mabel is here, sir; not the Dook."

"I suppose I must dress before I face the quality," muttered Rorie sulkily, and he went leaping upstairs — three steps at a time — to exchange his brown shooting-clothes and leather gaiters for that dress-suit of his which was continually getting too small for him. Rorie detested himself in a dress-suit and a white tie.

"You beast," he cried, addressing his reflection in the tall glass door of his *armoire*, "you are the image of a waiter at The Clarendon."

The Briarwood drawing-room looked a great deal too vast and too lofty for the three women who were occupying it this evening. It was a finely-proportioned room, and its amber satin hangings made a pleasing background for the white and gold furniture. White, gold, and amber made up the prevailing tone of colour. Clusters of wax lights against the walls, and a crystal chandelier with many candles, filled the room with a soft radiance. It was a room without shadow. There were no recesses, no deep-set

windows or doors. All was coldly bright, faultlessly elegant. Rorie detested his mother's drawing-room almost as much as he detested himself in a dress-coat that was too short in the sleeves.

The matrons were seated on each side of the shining gold and steel fireplace, before which there stretched an island of silky white fur. Lady Jane Vawdrey's younger sister was a stout, comfortable-looking woman in gray silk, who hardly realised one's preconceived notion of a duchess. Lady Jane herself had dignity enough for the highest rank in the "Almanach de Gotha." She wore dark green velvet and old rose-point, and looked like a portrait of an Austrian princess by Velasquez. Years had not impaired the purity of her blonde complexion. Her aquiline nose, thin lips, small firm chin, were the features of one born to rule. Her light brown hair showed no streak of gray. An admirable woman, no doubt, for anybody else's mother, as Rorie so often said to himself.

The young lady was still sitting at the piano, remote from the two elders, her slim white fingers running in and out and to and fro in those

wondrous intricacies and involutions which distinguish modern classical music. Rorie hated all that running about the piano to no purpose, and could not perceive his cousin's merit in having devoted three or four hours of her daily life for the last seven years to the accomplishment of this melodious meandering. She left off playing, and held out her small white hand to him as he came to the piano, after shaking hands with his aunt.

What was she like, this paragon formed by a mother's worshipping love and ceaseless care, this one last pearl in the crown of domestic life, this child of so many prayers, and hopes, and fears, and deep pathetic rejoicings?

She was very fair to look upon—complete and beautiful as a pearl—with that outward purity, that perfect delicacy of tint and harmony of detail which is in itself a charm. Study her as captiously as you would, you could find no flaw in this jewel. The small regular features were so delicately chiselled, the fair fine skin was so transparent, the fragile figure so exquisitely moulded, the ivory hand and arm were so perfect—no, you could

discover no bad drawing or crude colouring in this human picture. She lifted her clear blue eyes to Rorie's face, and smiled at him in gentle welcome; and though he felt intensely savage at having been summoned home like a school-boy, he could not refuse her a responsive smile, or a gentle pressure of the taper fingers.

"And so you have been dining with those horrid people!" she exclaimed with an air of playful reproach, "and on your last night in Hampshire—quite too unkind to Aunt Jane."

"I don't know whom you mean by horrid people, Mabel," answered Rorie, chilled back into sulkiness all at once; "the people I was with are all that is good and pleasant."

"Then you've not been at the Tempests' after all?"

"I have been at the Tempests'. What have you to say against the Tempests?"

"Oh, I have nothing to say against them," said Lady Mabel, shrugging her pretty shoulders in her fawn-coloured silk gown. "There are some things that do not require to be said."

"Mr. Tempest is the best and kindest of men; his wife is—well, a nonentity, perhaps, but not a disagreeable one; and his daughter——"

Here Rorie came to a sudden stop, which Lady Mabel accentuated with a silvery little laugh.

"His daughter is charming," she cried, when she had done laughing; "red hair, and a green habit with brass buttons, a yellow waistcoat like her papa's, and a rose in her button-hole. How I should like to see her in Rotten Row!"

"I'll warrant there wouldn't be a better horsewoman or a prettier girl there," cried Rorie, scarlet with indignation.

His mother looked daggers. His cousin gave another silvery laugh, clear as those pearly treble runs upon the Erard; but that pretty artificial laugh had a ring which betrayed her mortification.

"Rorie is thorough," she said; "when he likes people he thinks them perfection. You do think that little red-haired girl quite perfection, now don't you, Rorie?" pursued Lady Mabel, sitting down before the piano again, and touching the notes silently as she seemed to admire the slender

diamond hoops upon her white fingers — old-fashioned rings that had belonged to a patrician great-grandmother. "You think her quite a model young lady, though they say she can hardly read, and makes her mark—like William the Conqueror —instead of signing her name, and spends her life in the stables, and occasionally, when the fox gets back to earth—swears."

"I don't know who they may be," cried Roderick, savagely, "but they say a pack of lies. Violet Tempest is as well educated as—any girl need be. All girls can't be paragons; or, if they could, this earth would be intolerable for the rest of humanity. Lord deliver us from a world overrun with paragons. Violet Tempest is little more than a child, a spoiled child, if you like, but she has a heart of gold, and a firmer seat in her saddle than any other woman in Hampshire."

Roderick had turned from scarlet to pale by the time he finished this speech. His mother had paled at the first mention of poor Vixen. That young lady's name acted upon Lady Jane's feelings very much as a red rag acts on a bull.

"I think after keeping you away from your mother on the last night of your vacation, Mr. Tempest might at least have had the good taste to let you come home sober," said Lady Jane, with suppressed rage.

"I drank a couple of glasses of still hock at dinner, and not a drop of anything else from the time I entered the Abbey House till I left it; and I don't think, considering how I've seasoned myself with Bass at Oxford, that two glasses of Rudesheimer would floor me," explained Rorie, with recovered calmness.

"Oh, but you were drinking deep of a more intoxicating nectar," cried Lady Mabel, with that provokingly distinct utterance of hers. She had been taught to speak as carefully as girls of inferior rank are taught to play Beethoven—every syllable studied, every tone trained and ripened to the right quality. "You were with Violet Tempest."

"How you children quarrel!" exclaimed the Duchess; "you could hardly be worse if you were lovers. Come here, Rorie, and tell me all that has happened to you since we saw you at Lord's

in July. Never mind these Tempest people. They are of the smallest possible importance. Of course, Rorie must have somebody to amuse himself with while we are away."

"And now we are come back, he is off to Oxford," said Mabel with an aggrieved air.

"You shouldn't have stayed so long in Switzerland then," retorted Rorie.

"Oh, but it was my first visit, and everything is so lovely. After all the Swiss landscapes I have done in chalk, and pencil, and water-colours, I was astonished to find what a stranger I was to the scenery. I blushed when I remembered those dreadful landscapes of mine. I was ashamed to look at Mont Blanc. I felt as if the Matterhorn would fall and crush me."

"I think I shall do Switzerland next long," said Rorie patronisingly, as if it would be a good thing for Switzerland.

"You might have come this year while we were there," said Lady Mabel.

"No, I mightn't. I've been grinding. If you knew what a dose of Aristotle I've had, you'd pity

me. That's where you girls have the best of it. You learn to read a story-book in two or three modern languages, to meander up and down the piano, and spoil Bristol board, or Whatman's hot-pressed imperial, and then you call yourselves educated; while we have to go back to the beginning of civilisation, and find out what a lot of old Greek duffers were driving at when they sat in the sunshine and prosed like old boots."

Lady Mabel looked at him with a serene smile.

"Would you be surprised to hear that I know a little Greek," she said, "just enough to struggle through the Socratic dialogues with the aid of my master?"

Roderick started as if he had been stung.

"What a shame," he cried. "Aunt Sophia, what do you mean by making a Lady Jane Grey or an Elizabeth Barrett Browning of her?"

"A woman who has to occupy a leading position can hardly know too much," answered the Duchess sententiously.

"Ah, to be sure, Mabel will marry some diplomatic swell, and be entertaining ambassadors

by-and-by. And when some modern Greek envoy comes simpering up to her with a remark about the weather, it will be an advantage for her to know Plato. I understand. Wheels within wheels."

"The Duchess of Dovedale's carriage," announced the butler, rolling out the syllables as if it were a personal gratification to pronounce them.

Mabel rose at once from the piano, and came to say good-night to her aunt.

"My dear child, it's quite early," said Lady Jane; "Roderick's last night, too. And your mamma is in no hurry."

Mabel looked at Roderick, but that young gentleman was airing himself on the hearth-rug, and gazing absently up at the ceiling. It evidently signified very little to him whether his aunt and cousin went or stayed.

"You know you told papa you would be home soon after ten," said Lady Mabel, and the Duchess rose immediately.

She had a way of yielding to her only daughter which her stronger-minded sister highly disapproved. The first duty of a mother, in Lady

Jane's opinion, was to rule her child, the second, to love it. The idea was no doubt correct in the abstract; but the practice was not succeeding too well with Roderick.

"Good-night and good-bye," said Lady Mabel, when the maid had brought her wraps, and Rorie had put them on.

"Not good-bye," said the good-natured Duchess; "Rorie must come to breakfast to-morrow, and see the Duke. He has just bought some wonderful shorthorns, and I am sure he would like to show them to you, Rorie, because you can appreciate them. He was too tired to come out to-night, but I know he wants to see you."

"Thanks. I'll be there," answered Rorie, and he escorted the ladies to their carriage; but not another word did Mabel speak till the brougham had driven away from Briarwood.

"What a horrid young man Roderick has grown, mamma," she remarked decisively, when they were outside the park-gates.

"My love, I never saw him look handsomer."

"I don't mean his looks. Good looks in a man

are a superfluity. But his manners—I never saw anything so underbred. Those Tempest people are spoiling him."

"Roderick," said Lady Jane, just as Rorie was contemplating an escape to the billiard-room and his cigar, "I want a little serious talk with you."

Rorie shivered in his shoes. He knew too well what his mother's serious talk meant. He shrugged his shoulders with a movement that indicated a dormant resistance, and went quietly into the drawing-room.

CHAPTER IV.

RORIE COMES OF AGE.

"Bless my soul!" cried the Squire; "it's a vixen, after all."

This is how Squire Tempest greeted the family doctor's announcement of his first baby's sex. He had been particularly anxious for a son to inherit the Abbey House estate, succeed to his father's dignities as master of the fox-hounds, and in a general way sustain the pride and glory of the family name; and, behold! Providence had given him a daughter.

"The deuce is in it," ejaculated the Squire; "to think that it should be a vixen!"

This is how Violet Tempest came by her curious pet name. Before she was short-coated, she had contrived to exhibit a very spirited, and even vixenish temper, and the family doctor, who loved a small joke, used to ask after Miss Vixen when

he paid his professional visits. As she grew older, her tawny hair was not unlike a red fox's brush in its bright golden-brown hue, and her temper proved decidedly vixenish.

"I wish you wouldn't call Violet by that dreadful nickname, dear," Mrs. Tempest remonstrated mildly.

"My darling, it suits her to a nicety," replied the Squire, and he took his own way in this as in most things.

The earth rolled round, and the revolving years brought no second baby to the Abbey House. Every year made the Squire fonder of his little golden-haired girl. He put her on a soft white ball of a pony as soon as she could sit up straight, and took her about the Forest with a leading-rein. No one else was allowed to teach Vixen to ride. Young as she was, she soon learnt to do without the leading-rein, and the gentle white pony was discarded as too quiet for little Miss Tempest. Before her eleventh birthday she rode to hounds, rose before the sun to hunt the young fox-cubs in early autumn, and saw the stag at bay on the

wild heathery downs above the wooded valleys that sink and fall below Boldrewood with almost Alpine grandeur. She was a creature full of life, and courage, and generous impulses, and spontaneous leanings to all good thoughts; but she was a spoiled child, liked her own way, and had no idea of being guided by anybody else's will—unless it had been her father's, and he never thwarted her.

Him she adored with the fondest love that child ever gave to parent: a blind worshipping love, that saw in him the perfection of manhood, the beginning and end of earthly good. If anyone had dared to say in Vixen's hearing that her father could, by any possible combination of circumstances, do wrong, act unjustly, or ungenerously, it would have been better for that man to have come to handy grips with a tiger-cat than with Violet Tempest. Her reverence for her father, and her belief in him, were boundless.

There never, perhaps, was a happier childhood than Violet's. She was daughter and heiress to one of the most popular men in that part of the country, and everybody loved her. She was not

much given to visiting in a methodical way among the poor, and it had never entered into her young mind that it was her mission to teach older people the way to heaven; but if there was trouble in the village—a sick child, a husband in prison for rabbit snaring, a dead baby, a little boy's pinafore set on fire—Vixen and her pony were always to the fore; and it was an axiom in the village that, where Miss Tempest did "take," it was very good for those she took to. Violet never withdrew her hand when she had put it to the plough. If she made a promise, she always kept it. However long the sickness, however dire the poverty, Vixen's patience and benevolence lasted to the end.

The famous princess in the story, whose sleep was broken because there was a pea under her seven feather-beds, had scarcely a more untroubled life than Vixen. She had her own way in everything. She did exactly what she liked with her comfortable, middle-aged governess, Miss McCroke, learnt what she pleased, and left what she disliked unlearned. She had the prettiest ponies in Hampshire to ride, the prettiest dresses to wear. Her

mother was not a woman to bestow mental culture upon her only child, but she racked her small brain to devise becoming costumes for Violet: the coloured stockings which harmonised best with each particular gown, the neat little buckled shoes, the fascinating Hessian boots. Nothing was too beautiful or too costly for Violet. She was the one thing her parents possessed in the world, and they lavished much love upon her; but it never occurred to Mr. and Mrs. Tempest, as it had occurred to the Duchess of Dovedale—to make their daughter a paragon.

In this perpetual sunshine Violet grew up, fair as most things are that grow in the sunshine. She loved her father with all her heart, and mind, and soul; she loved her mother with a lesser love; she had a tolerant affection for Miss McCroke; she loved her ponies, and the dog Argus; she loved the hounds in the kennels; she loved every honest familiar face of nurse, servant, and stable-man, gardener, keeper, and huntsman, that had looked upon her with friendly, admiring eyes, ever since she could remember.

Not to be loved and admired would have been the strangest thing to Violet. She would hardly have recognised herself in an unappreciative circle. If she could have heard Lady Mabel talking about her, it would have been like the sudden revelation of an unknown world—a world in which it was possible for people to dislike and misjudge her.

This is one of the disadvantages of being reared in a little heaven of domestic love. The outside world seems so hard, and bleak, and dreary afterwards, and the inhabitants thereof passing cruel.

Miss Tempest looked upon Roderick Vawdrey as her own particular property—a person whom she had the right to order about as she pleased. Rorie had been her playfellow and companion in his holiday-time for the last five years. All their tastes were in common. They had the same love for the brute creation, the same wild delight in rushing madly through the air on the backs of unreasoning animals; widely different in their tastes from Lady Mabel, who had once been run away with in a pony-carriage, and looked upon all

horses as incipient murderers. They had the same love of nature, the same indifference to books, and the same careless scorn of all the state and ceremony of life.

Vixen was "rising fifteen," as her father called it, and Rorie was just five years her senior. The Squire saw them gay and happy together without one serious thought of what might come of their childish friendship in the growth of years. That his Vixen could ever care for anyone but her "old dad," was a notion that had not yet found its way into the Squire's brain. She seemed to him quite as much his own property, his own to do what he liked with, singly and simply attached to him, as his favourite horse or his favourite dog. So there were no shadowings forth in the paternal mind as to any growth and development which the mutual affection of these two young people might take in the future.

It was very different with Lady Jane Vawdrey, who never saw her son and his cousin Mabel together without telling herself how exactly they were suited to each other, and what a nice thing it

would be for the Briarwood and Ashbourne estates to be united by their marriage.

Rorie went back to college, and contrived to struggle through his next examinations with an avoidance of actual discredit; but when Christmas came he did not return to the Forest, though Violet had counted on his coming, and had thought that it would be good fun to have his help in the decorations for the little Gothic church in the valley—a pretty little new church, like a toy, which the Squire had built and paid for, and endowed with a perpetual seventy pounds a year out of his own pocket. It would have been fun to see poor Rorie prick his clumsy fingers with the holly. Vixen laughed at his awkwardness in advance, when she talked to Miss McCroke about him, and drew upon herself that lady's mild reproval.

But Christmas came and brought no Rorie. He had gone off to spend his Christmas at the Duke of Dovedale's Scotch castle. Easter came, but still no Rorie. He was at Putney, with the 'Varsity crew, or in London with the Dovedales, riding in the Row, and forgetting dear old Hamp-

shire and the last of the hunting, for which he would have been just in time.

Even the long vacation came without Rorie. He had gone for that promised tour in Switzerland, at his mother's instigation, and was only to come home late in the year to keep his twenty-first birthday, which was to be honoured in a very subdued and unhilarious fashion at Briarwood.

"Mamma," said Violet at breakfast-time one August morning, with her nose scornfully tilted, "what is Mr. Vawdrey like—dark or fair?"

"Why Violet, you can't have forgotten him," protested her mother, with languid astonishment.

"I think he has been away long enough for me to forget even the colour of his hair, mamma; and as he hasn't written to anybody, we may fairly suppose he has forgotten us."

"Vixen misses her old playfellow," said the Squire, busy with the demolition of a grouse. "But Rorie is a young man now, you know, dear, and has work to do in the world—duties, my pet—duties."

"And is a young man's first duty to forget his old friends?" inquired Vixen naïvely.

"My pet, you can't expect a lad of that kind to write letters. I am a deuced bad hand at letter-writing myself, and always was. I don't think a man's hand was ever made to pinch a pen. Nature has given us a broad strong grasp, to grip a sword or a gun. Your mother writes most of my letters, Vixen, you know, and I shall expect you to help her in a year or two. Let me see; Rorie will be one-and-twenty in October, and there are to be high jinks at Briarwood, I believe, so there's something for you to look forward to, my dear."

"Edward!" exclaimed Mrs. Tempest reproachfully; "you forget that Violet is not out. She will not be sixteen till next February."

"Bless her!" cried the Squire, with a tender look at his only child, "she has grown up like a green bay-tree. But if this were to be quite a friendly affair at Briarwood, she might go, surely."

"It will not be a friendly affair," said Mrs.

Tempest; "Lady Jane never gives friendly parties. There is nothing friendly in her nature, and I don't think she likes us—much. But I daresay we shall be asked, and if we go I must have a new dress," added the gentle lady with a sigh of resignation. "It will be a dinner, no doubt; and the Duke and the Duchess will be there, of course."

The card of invitation came in due course, three weeks before the birthday. It was to be a dinner, as Mrs. Tempest had opined. She wrote off to her milliner at once, and there was a passage of letters and fashion-plates and patterns of silk to and fro, and some of Mrs. Tempest's finest lace came out of the perfumed chest in which she kept her treasures, and was sent off to Madame Theodore.

Poor Vixen beheld these preparations with an aching heart. She did not care about dinner-parties in the least, but she would have liked to be with Roderick on his birthday. She would have liked it to have been a hunting-day, and to have ridden for a wild scamper across the hills

with him—to have seen the rolling downs of the Wight blue in the distance—to have felt the soft south wind blowing in her face, and to have ridden by his side, neck and neck, all day long; and then to have gone home to the Abbey House to dinner, to the snug round table in the library, and the dogs, and papa in his happiest mood, expanding over his port and walnuts. That would have been a happy birthday for all of them, in Violet's opinion.

The Squire and his daughter had plenty of hunting in this merry month of October, but there had been no sign of Rorie and his big raking chestnut in the field, nor had anyone in the Forest heard of or seen the young Oxonian.

"I daresay he is only coming home in time for the birthday," Mrs. Tempest remarked placidly, and went on with her preparations for that event.

She wanted to make a strong impression on the Duchess, who had not behaved too well to her, only sending her invitations for indiscriminate afternoon assemblies, which Mrs. Tempest had

graciously declined, pleading her feeble health as a reason for not going to garden-parties.

Vixen was in a peculiar temper during those three weeks, and poor Miss McCroke had hard work with her.

"*Der, die, das,*" cried Vixen, throwing down her German grammar in a rage one morning, when she had been making a muddle of the definite article in her exercise, and the patient governess had declared that they really must go back to the very beginning of things. "What stupid people the Germans are! Why can't they have one little word for everything, as we have? T, h, e, the. Any child can learn that. What do they mean by chopping up their language into little bits, like the pieces in a puzzle? Why, even the French are more reasonable—though they're bad enough, goodness knows, with their hes and shes—feminine tables, and masculine beds. Why should I be bothered to learn all this rubbish? I'm not going to be a governess, and it will never be any use to me. Papa doesn't know a single sentence in French or German, and he's quite happy."

"But if your papa were travelling on the Continent, Violet, he would find his ignorance of the language a great deprivation."

"No, he wouldn't. He'd have a courier."

"Are you aware, my dear, that we have wasted five minutes already in this discursive conversation?" remarked Miss McCroke, looking at a fat useful watch, which she wore at her side in the good old fashion. "We will leave the grammar for the present, and you can repeat the first part of Schiller's Song of the Bell."

"I'd rather say the Fight with the Dragon," said Vixen, "there's more fire and life in it. I do like Schiller, Crokey dear. But isn't it a pity he didn't write in English?"

And Vixen put her hands behind her, and began to recite the wonderful story of the knight who slew the dragon, and very soon her eyes kindled and her cheeks were aflame, and the grand verses were rolled out rapidly, with a more or less faulty pronunciation, but plenty of life and vehemence. This exercise of mind and memory suited Vixen a great deal better than dull plodding at the first

principles of grammar, and the perpetual *der, die, das.*

This day was the last of October, and Roderick Vawdrey's birthday. He had not been seen at the Abbey House yet. He had returned to Briarwood before this, no doubt, but had not taken the trouble to come and see his old friends.

"He's a man now, and has duties, and has done with us," thought Vixen savagely.

She was very glad that it was such a wretched day—a hideous day for anyone's twenty-first birthday, ominous of all bad things, she thought. There was not a rift in the dull gray sky; the straight fine rain came down persistently, soaking into the sodden earth, and sending up an odour of dead leaves. The smooth shining laurels in the shrubbery were the only things in nature that seemed no worse for the perpetual downpour. The gravel drives were spongy and sloppy. There was no hunting, or Vixen would have been riding her pony through rain and foul weather, and would have been comparatively independent of the elements. But to be at home all day, watching the

rain, and thinking what a horrid, ungrateful young man Rorie was! That was dreary.

Mrs. Tempest went to her room to lie down directly after luncheon. She wanted to keep herself fresh for the evening. She made quite a solemn business of this particular dinner-party. At five precisely, Pauline was to bring her a cup of tea. At half-past five she was to begin to dress. This would give her an hour and a half for her toilet, as Briarwood was an hour's drive from the Abbey House. So for the rest of that day—until she burst upon their astonished view in her new gown—Mrs. Tempest would be invisible to her family.

"What a disgusting birthday," cried Vixen, sitting in the deep embrasure of the hall window, with Argus at her side, dog and girl looking out at the glistening shrubbery.

Miss McCroke had gone to her room to write letters, or Vixen would have hardly been allowed to remain peacefully in such an inelegant position, her knees drawn up to her chin, her arms embracing her legs, her back against the stout oak shutter. Yet the girl and dog made rather a pretty picture,

despite the inelegance of Vixen's attitude. The tawny hair, black velvet frock, and careless amber sash, amber stockings, and broad-toed Cromwell shoes; the tawny mastiff curled in the opposite corner of the deep recess; the old armorial bearings, sending pale shafts of parti-coloured light across Vixen's young head;—these things made a picture full of light and colour, framed in the dark brown oak.

"What an abominable birthday!" ejaculated Vixen; "if it were such weather as this on my twenty-first birthday I should think Nature had taken a dislike to me. But I don't suppose Rorie cares. He is playing billiards with a lot of his friends, and smoking, and making a horror of himself, I daresay, and hardly knows whether it rains or shines."

Drip, drip, drip, came the rain on the glistening leaves, berberis and laurel, bay and holly, American oaks of richest red and bronze, copper beeches, tall rhododendrons, cypress of every kind, and behind them a dense black screen of yew. The late roses looked miserable. Vixen would have liked to have

brought them in and put them by the hall fire—the good old hearth with its pile of blazing logs, before which Nip the pointer was stretched at ease, his muscular toes stiffening themselves occasionally, as if he were standing at a bird in his dreams.

Vixen went on watching the rain. It was rather a lazy way of spending the afternoon certainly, but Miss Tempest was out of humour with her little world, and did not feel equal to groping out the difficulties, the inexorable double sharps and odious double flats, in a waltz of Chopin's. She watched the straight thin rain, and thought about Rorie—chiefly to the effect that she hated him, and never could, by any possibility, like him again.

Gradually the trickle of the rain from an overflowing waterpipe took the sound of a tune. No *berceuse* by Gounod was ever more rest-compelling. The full white lids drooped over the big brown eyes, the little locked hands loosened, the soft round chin fell forward on the knees, Argus gave a snort of satisfaction, and laid his heavy head on the velvet gown. Girl and dog were asleep. There was no sound in the wide old hall except the

soft falling of wood ashes, the gentle breathing of girl and dogs.

Too pretty a picture assuredly to be lost to the eye of mankind.

Whose footstep was this sounding on the wet gravel half an hour later? Too quick and light for the Squire's. Who was this coming in softly out of the rain, all dripping like a water god? Who was this whose falcon eye took in the picture at a glance, and who stole cat-like to the window, and bending down his dark wet head, gave Violet's sleeping lips the first lover's kiss that had ever saluted them?

Violet awoke with a faint shiver of surprise and joy. Instinct told her from whom that kiss came, though it was the first time Roderick had kissed her since he went to Eton. The lovely brown eyes opened and looked into the dark gray ones. The ruddy brown head rested on Rorie's shoulder. The girl—half child, half woman, and all loving trustfulness, looked up at him with a glad smile. His heart was stirred with a new feeling as those softly bright eyes looked into his. It was the early dawn

of a passionate love. The head lying on his breast seemed to him the fairest thing on earth.

"Rorie, how disgracefully you have behaved, and how utterly I detest you!" exclaimed Vixen, giving him a vigorous push, and scrambling down from the window seat. "To be all this time in Hampshire and never come near us."

A moment ago, in that first instant of a newly awakened delight, she was almost betrayed into telling him that she loved him dearly, and had found life empty without him. But having had just time enough to recover herself, she drew herself up as straight as a dart, and looked at him as Kate may have looked at Petruchio during that remarkably unpleasant interview in which they made each other's acquaintance.

"All this time!" cried Rorie. "Do you know how long I have been in Hampshire?"

"Haven't the least idea," retorted Vixen haughtily.

"Just half an hour—or, at least it is exactly half an hour since I was deposited with all my goods and chattels at the Lyndhurst Road Station."

"You are only just home from Switzerland?"

"Within this hour!"

"And you have not even been to Briarwood?"

"My honoured mother still awaits my duteous greetings."

"And this is your twenty-first birthday, and you came here first of all."

And, almost uninvited, the tawny head dropped on to his shoulder again, and the sweet childish lips allowed themselves to be kissed.

"Rorie, how brown you have grown."

"Have I!"

The gray eyes were looking into the brown ones admiringly, and the conversation was getting a trifle desultory.

Swift as a flash Violet recollected herself. It dawned upon her that it was not quite the right thing for a young lady "rising sixteen" to let herself be kissed so tamely. Besides, Rorie never used to do it. The thing was a new development, a curious outcome of his Swiss tour. Perhaps people did it in Switzerland, and Rorie had acquired the habit.

"How dare you do such a thing?" exclaimed Vixen, shaking herself free from the traveller's encircling arm.

"I didn't think you minded," said Rorie innocently; "and when a fellow comes home from a long journey he expects a warm welcome!"

"And I am glad to see you," cried Vixen, giving him both her hands with a glorious frankness; "but you don't know how I have been hating you lately."

"Why, Vixen?"

"For being always away. I thought you had forgotten us all—that you did not care a jot for any of us."

"I had not forgotten any of you, and I did care—very much—for some of you."

This, though vague, was consoling.

The brown became Roderick. Dark of visage always, he was now tanned to a bronze, as of one born under southern skies. Those deep gray eyes of his looked black under their black lashes. His dark hair was cut close to his well-shaped head. An incipient moustache shaded his upper lip,

and gave manhood to the strong, firm mouth. A manly face altogether, Roderick's, and handsome withal. Vixen's short life had shown her none handsomer.

He was tall and strongly built, with a frame that had been developed by many an athletic exercise—from throwing the hammer to pugilism. Vixen thought him the image of Richard Cœur de Lion. She had been reading "The Talisman" lately, and the Plantagenet was her ideal of manly excellence.

"Many happy returns of the day, Rorie," she said softly. "To think that you are of age to-day. Your own master."

"Yes, my infancy ceased and determined at the last stroke of midnight yesterday. I wonder whether my anxious mother will recognise that fact?"

"Of course you know what is going to happen at Briarwood. There is to be a grand dinner-party."

"And you are coming? How jolly!"

"Oh, no, Rorie. I'm not out yet, you know.

I shan't be for two years. Papa means to give me a season in town. He calls it having me broken to harness. He'll take a furnished house, and we shall have the horses up, and I shall ride in the Row. You'll be with us part of the time, won't you, Rorie?"

"*Ça se peut.* If papa will invite me."

"Oh, he will, if I wish it. It's to be my first season, you know, and I'm to have everything my own way."

"Will that be a novelty?" demanded Roderick, with intention.

"I don't know. I haven't had my own way in anything lately."

"How is that?"

"You have been away?"

At this naïve flattery, Roderick almost blushed.

"How you've grown, Vixen," he remarked presently.

"Have I really? Yes, I suppose I do grow. My frocks are always getting too short."

"Like the sleeves of my dress-coats a year or two ago."

"But now you are of age, and can't grow any more. What are you going to be, Rorie? What are you going to do with your liberty? Are you going into Parliament?"

Mr. Vawdrey indulged in a suppressed yawn.

"My mother would like it," he said, "but upon my word I don't care about it. I don't take enough interest in my fellow-creatures."

"If they were foxes you'd be anxious to legislate for them," suggested Vixen.

"I would certainly try to protect them from indiscriminate slaughter. And in fact, when one considers the looseness of existing game-laws, I think every country gentleman ought to be in Parliament."

"And there is the Forest for you to take care of."

"Yes, forestry is a subject on which I should like to have my say. I suppose I shall be obliged to turn senator. But I mean to take life easily—you may be sure of that, Vixen; and I intend to have the best stud of hunters in Hampshire. And now I think I must be off."

"No, you mustn't," cried Violet. "The dinner is not till eight. If you leave here at six you will have no end of time for getting home to dress. How did you come?"

"On these two legs."

"You shall have four to take you to Briarwood. West shall drive you home in papa's dog-cart, with the new mare. You don't know her, do you? Papa only bought her last spring. She is such a beauty, and goes—goes—oh, like a skyrocket. She bolts occasionally; and there are a good many things she doesn't like; but you don't mind that, do you?"

"Not in the least. It would be rather romantic to be smashed on one's twenty-first birthday. Will you tell them to order West to get ready at once."

"Oh, but you are to stop to tea with Miss McCroke and me—that's part of our bargain. No kettledrum, no Starlight Bess! And you'd scarcely care about walking to Briarwood under such rain as that!"

"So be it, then; kettledrum and Starlight Bess, at any hazard of maternal wrath. But really

now, I'm doing a most ungentlemanly thing, Vixen, to oblige you!"

"Always be ungentlemanly then for my sake—if it's ungentlemanly to come and see me," said Vixen coaxingly.

They were standing side by side in the big window looking out at the straight thin rain. The two pairs of lips were not very far away from each other, and Rorie might have been tempted to commit a third offence against the proprieties, if Miss McCroke had not fortunately entered at this very moment. She was wonderfully surprised at seeing Mr. Vawdrey, congratulated him ceremoniously upon his majority, and infused an element of stiffness into the small assembly.

"Rorie is going to stay to tea," said Vixen. "We'll have it here by the fire, please, Crokey dear. One can't have too much of a good fire this weather. Or shall we go to my den? Which would you like best, Rorie?"

"I think we had better have tea here, Violet," interjected Miss McCroke, ringing the bell.

Her pupil's *sanctum sanctorum*—that pretty

upstairs room, half schoolroom, half boudoir, and wholly untidy—was not, in Miss McCroke's opinion, an apartment to be violated by the presence of a young man.

"And as Rorie hasn't had any luncheon, and has come ever so far out of his way to see me, please order something substantial for him," said Vixen.

Her governess obeyed. The gipsy table was wheeled up to the broad hearth, and presently the old silver tea-pot and kettle, and the yellow cups and saucers, were shining in the cheery firelight. The old butler put a sirloin and a game-pie on the sideboard, and then left the little party to shift for themselves, in pleasant picnic fashion.

Vixen sat down before the hissing tea-kettle with a pretty important air, like a child making tea out of toy tea-things. Rorie brought a low square stool to a corner close to her, and seated himself with his chin a little above the tea-table.

"You can't eat roast beef in that position," said Vixen.

"Oh yes I can—I can do anything that's mad

or merry this evening. But I'm not at all sure that I want beef, though it is nearly three months since I've seen an honest bit of ox beef. I think thin bread and butter—or roses and dew even—quite substantial enough for me this evening."

"You're afraid of spoiling your appetite for the grand dinner," said Vixen.

"No, I'm not. I hate grand dinners. Fancy making a fine art of eating, and studying one's *menu* beforehand to see what combination of dishes will harmonise best with one's internal economy. And then the names of the things are always better than the things themselves. It's like a show at a fair, all the best outside. Give me a slice of English beef or mutton, and a bird that my gun has shot, and let all the fine-art dinners go hang."

"Cut him a slice of beef, dear Miss McCroke," said Vixen.

"Not now, thanks; I can't eat now. I'm going to drink orange pekoe."

Argus had taken up his position between Violet and her visitor. He sat bolt upright, like a

sentinel keeping guard over his mistress; save that a human sentinel, unless idiotic or intoxicated, would hardly sit with his jaws wide apart, and his tongue hanging out of one side of his mouth, as Argus did. But this lolloping attitude of the canine tongue was supposed to indicate a mind at peace with creation.

"Are you very glad to come of age, Rorie?" asked Vixen, turning her bright brown eyes upon him, full of curiosity.

"Well, it will be rather nice to have as much money as I want without asking my mother for it. She was my only guardian, you know. My father had such confidence in her rectitude and capacity that he left everything in her hands."

"Do you find Briarwood much improved?" inquired Miss McCroke.

Lady Jane had been doing a good deal to her orchid-houses lately.

"I haven't found Briarwood at all yet," answered Rorie, "and Vixen seems determined I shan't find it."

"What, have you only just returned?"

"Only just."

"And you have not seen Lady Jane yet?" exclaimed Miss McCroke with a horrified look.

"It sounds rather undutiful, doesn't it? I was awfully tired, after travelling all night; and I made this a kind of halfway house."

"Two sides of a triangle are invariably longer than any one side," remarked Vixen, gravely. "At least that's what Miss McCroke has taught me."

"It was rather out of my way, of course. But I wanted to see whether Vixen had grown. And I wanted to see the Squire."

"Papa has gone to Ringwood, to look at a horse; but you'll see him at the grand dinner. He'll be coming home to dress presently."

"I hope you had an agreeable tour, Mr. Vawdrey," said Miss McCroke.

"Oh, uncommonly jolly."

"And you like Switzerland?"

"Yes; it's nice and hilly."

And then Roderick favoured them with a sketch of his travels, while they sipped their tea, and while

Vixen made the dogs balance pieces of cake on their big blunt noses.

It was all very nice—the Tête Noire, and Mont Blanc, and the Matterhorn. Rorie jumbled them all together, without the least regard to geography. He had done a good deal of climbing, had worn out and lost dozens of alpenstocks, and had brought home a case of Swiss carved work for his friends.

"There's a clock for your den, Vixen—I shall bring it to-morrow—with a little cock-robin that comes out of his nest and sings—no end of jolly."

"How lovely!" cried Violet.

The tall eight-day clock in a corner of the hall chimed the half-hour.

"Half-past five, and Starlight Bess not ordered," exclaimed Roderick.

"Let's go out to the stables and see about her," suggested Vixen. "And then I can show you my pony. You remember Titmouse, the one that *would* jump?"

"Violet!" ejaculated the aggrieved governess. "Do you suppose I would permit you to go out of doors in such weather?"

"Do you think it's still raining?" asked Vixen innocently. "It may have cleared up. Well, we'd better order the cart," she added meekly, as she rang the bell. "I'm not of age yet, you see, Rorie. Please, Peters, tell West to get papa's dog-cart ready for Mr. Vawdrey, and to drive Starlight Bess."

Rorie looked at the bright face admiringly. The shadows had deepened; there was no light in the great oak-panelled room except the ruddy fire-glow, and in this light Violet Tempest looked her loveliest. The figures in the tapestry seemed to move in the flickering light—appeared and vanished, vanished and appeared, like the phantoms of a dream. The carved bosses of the ceiling were reflected grotesquely on the oaken wall above the tapestry. The stags' heads had a goblin look. It was like a scene of enchantment, and Violet, in her black frock and amber sash, looked like the enchantress—Circe, Vivien, Melusine, or somebody of equally dubious antecedents.

It was Miss McCroke's sleepiest hour. Orange pekoe, which has an awakening influence upon

most people, acted as an opiate upon her. She sat blinking owlishly at the two young figures.

Rorie roused himself with a great effort.

"Unless Starlight Bess spins me along the road pretty quickly, I shall hardly get to Briarwood by dinner-time," he said; "and upon my honour, I don't feel the least inclination to go."

"Oh, what fun if you were absent at your coming-of-age dinner!" cried Vixen, with her brown eyes dancing mischievously. "They would have to put an empty chair for you, like Banquo's."

"It would be a lark," acquiesced Rorie, "but it wouldn't do; I should hear too much about it afterwards. A fellow's mother has some kind of claim upon him, you know. Now for Starlight Bess."

They went into the vestibule, and Rorie opened the door, letting in a gust of wind and rain, and the scent of autumn's last ill-used flowers.

"Oh, I so nearly forgot," said Violet, as they stood on the threshold, side by side, waiting for

the dog-cart to appear. "I've got a little present for you—quite a humble one for a grand young landowner like you—but I never could save much of my pocket-money; there are so many poor children always having scarlet-fever, or tumbling into the fire, or drinking out of boiling tea-kettles. But here it is, Rorie. I hope you won't hate it very much."

She put a little square packet into his hand, which he proceeded instantly to open.

"I shall love it, whatever it is."

"It's a portrait."

"You darling! The very thing I should have asked for."

"The portrait of someone you're fond of."

"Someone I adore," said Rorie.

He had extracted the locket from its box by this time. It was a thick oblong locket of dead gold, plain and massive; the handsomest of its kind that a Southampton jeweller could supply.

Rorie opened it eagerly, to look at the portrait.

There was just light enough from the newly-kindled vestibule lamp to show it to him.

"Why it's a dog," cried Rorie, with deep-toned disgust. "It's old Argus."

"Who did you think it was?"

"You, of course."

"What an idea! As if I should give anyone my portrait. I knew you were fond of Argus. Doesn't his head come out beautifully? The photographer said he was the best sitter he had had for ever so long. I hope you don't quite detest the locket, Rorie."

"I admire it intensely, and I'm deeply grateful. But I feel inexpressibly sold, all the same. And I am to go about the world with Argus dangling at my breast. Well, for your sake, Vixen, I'll submit even to that degradation."

Here came the cart, with two flaming lamps, like angry eyes flashing through the shrubberies. It pulled up at the steps. Rorie and Vixen clasped hands and bade good-night, and then the young man swung himself lightly into the seat beside the

driver, and away went Starlight Bess, making just that sort of dashing and spirited start which inspires the timorous beholder with the idea that the next proceeding will be the bringing home of the driver and his companion upon a brace of shutters.

CHAPTER V.

RORIE MAKES A SPEECH.

Somewhat to his surprise, and much to his delight, Roderick Vawdrey escaped the maternal lecture which he was wont undutifully to describe as a "wigging." When he entered the drawing-room in full dress just about ten minutes before the first of the guests was announced, Lady Jane received him with a calm affectionateness, and asked him no questions about his disposal of the afternoon. Perhaps this unusual clemency was in honour of his twenty-first birthday, Rorie thought. A man could not come of age more than once in his life. He was entitled to some favour.

The dinner-party was as other dinners at Briarwood; all the arrangements perfect; the *menu* commendable, if not new; the general result a little dull.

The Ashbourne party were among the first to

arrive; the Duke portly and affable; the Duchess delighted to welcome her favourite nephew; Lady Mabel looking very fragile, flower-like, and graceful in her pale blue gauze dinner-dress. Lady Mabel affected the palest tints, half-colours which were more like the shadows in a sunset sky than any earthly hues.

She took possession of Rorie at once, treating him with a calm superiority, as if he had been a younger brother.

"Tell me all about Switzerland," she said, as they sat side by side on one of the amber ottomans. "What was it that you liked best?"

"The climbing, of course," he answered.

"But which of all the landscapes? What struck you most? What impressed you most vividly? Your first view of Mont Blanc, or that marvellous gorge below the Tête Noire—or——?"

"It was all uncommonly jolly. But there's a family resemblance in Swiss mountains, don't you know? They're all white—and they're all peaky. There's a likeness in Swiss lakes, too, if you come to think of it. They're all blue, and they're all

wet. And Swiss villages, now—don't you think they are rather disappointing? — such a cruel plagiarism of those plaster châlets the image-men carry about the London streets, and no candle-ends burning inside to make 'em look pretty. But I liked Lucerne uncommonly, there was such a capital billiard-table at the hotel."

"Roderick!" cried Lady Mabel, with a disgusted look. "I don't think you have a vestige of poetry in your nature."

"I hope I haven't," replied Rorie devoutly.

"You could see those sublime scenes, and never once feel your heart thrilled or your mind exalted—you can come home from your first Swiss tour and talk about billiard-tables!"

"The scenery was very nice," said Rorie thoughtfully. "Yes; there were times, perhaps, when I was a trifle stunned by all that grand calm beauty, the silence, the solitude, the awfulness of it all; but I had hardly time to feel the thrill when I came bump up against a party of tourists, English or American, all talking the same twaddle, and all patronising the scenery. That took the charm out

of the landscape somehow, and I coiled up, as the Yankees say. And now you want me to go into second-hand raptures, and repeat my emotions, as if I were writing a tourist's article for a magazine. I can't do it, Mabel."

"Well, I won't bore you any more about it," said Lady Mabel, "but I confess my disappointment. I thought we should have such nice long talks about Switzerland."

"What's the use of talking of a place? If it's so lovely that one can't live without it, one had better go back there."

This was a practical way of putting things which was too much for Lady Mabel. She fanned herself gently with a great fan of blue cloudy looking feathers, such as Titania might have used that midsummer night near Athens. She relapsed into a placid silence, looking at Rorie thoughtfully with her calm blue eyes.

His travels had improved him. That bronze hue suited him wonderfully well. He looked more manly. He was no longer a beardless boy, to be patronised with that gracious elder-sister air of

Lady Mabel's. She felt that he was farther off from her than he had been last season in London.

"How late you arrived this evening," she said after a pause. "I came to five-o'clock tea with my aunt, and found her quite anxious about you. If it hadn't been for your telegram from Southampton, she would have fancied there was something wrong."

"She needn't have fidgeted herself after three o'clock," answered Rorie coolly; "my luggage must have come home by that time."

"I see. You sent the luggage on before, and came by a later train?"

"No, I didn't. I stopped halfway between here and Lyndhurst to see some old friends."

"Flattering for my aunt," said Mabel. "I should have thought she was your oldest friend."

"Of course she has the prior claim. But as I was going to hand myself over to her bodily at seven o'clock, to be speechified about and rendered generally ridiculous, after the manner of young men who come of age, I felt I was entitled to do what I liked in the interval."

"And therefore you went to the Tempests'," said Mabel, with her blue eyes sparkling. "I see. That is what you do when you do what you like."

"Precisely. I am very fond of Squire Tempest. When I first rode to hounds it was under his wing. There's my mother beckoning me; I am to go and do the civil to people."

And Roderick walked away from the ottoman to the spot where his mother stood, with the Duke of Dovedale at her side, receiving her guests.

It was a very grand party, in the way of blue blood, landed estate, diamonds, lace, satin and velvet, and self-importance. All the magnates of the soil, within accessible distance of Briarwood, had assembled to do honour to Rorie's coming of age. The dining-tables had been arranged in a horse-shoe, so as to accommodate fifty people in a room which, in its every-day condition, would not have been too large for thirty. The orchids and ferns upon this horse-shoe table made the finest floricultural show that had been seen for a long time. There were rare specimens from New Granada and the Philippine Islands; won-

drous flowers lately discovered in the Sierra Madre; blossoms of every shape and colour from the Cordilleras; richest varieties of hue—golden yellow, glowing crimson, creamy white; rare eccentricities of form and colour beside which any other flower would have looked vulgar; butterfly flowers and pitcher-shaped flowers, that had cost as much money as prize pigeons, and seemed as worthless, save to the connoisseur in the article. The Vawdrey racing-plate, won by Roderick's grandfather, was nowhere by comparison with those marvellous tropical blossoms, that fairy forest of fern. Everybody talked about the orchids, confessed his or her comparative ignorance of the subject, and complimented Lady Jane.

"The orchids made the hit of the evening," Rorie said afterwards. "It was their coming of age, not mine."

There was a moderate and endurable amount of speechifying by-and-by, when the monster double-crowned pines had been cut, and the purple grapes, almost as big as pigeons' eggs, had gone round.

The Duke of Dovedale assured his friends that

this was one of the proudest moments of his life, and that if Providence had permitted a son of his own to attain his majority, he, the Duke, could have hardly felt a deeper interest in the occasion than he felt to-day. He had—arra—arra—known this young man from childhood, and—had—er—um—never found him guilty of a mean action—or—arra—discovered in him a thought unworthy of an English gentleman.

This last was felt to be a strong point, as it implied that an English gentleman must needs be much better than any other gentleman.

A continental gentleman might, of course, be guilty of an unworthy thought and yet pass current, according to the loose morality of his nation. But the English article must be flawless.

And thus the Duke meandered on for five minutes or so, and there was a subdued gush of approval, and then an uncomfortable little pause, and then Rorie rose in his place, next the Duchess, and returned thanks.

He told them all how fond he was of them and the soil that bred them. How he meant to be

a Hampshire squire, pure and simple, if he could. How he had no higher ambition than to be useful and to do good in this little spot of England which Providence had given him for his inheritance. How, if he should go into Parliament by-and-by, as he had some thoughts of attempting to do, it would be in their interests that he would join that noble body of legislators; that it would be they and their benefit he would have always nearest his heart.

"There is not a tree in the Forest that I do not love," cried Rorie, fired with his theme, and forgetting to stammer; "and I believe there is not a tree, from the Twelve Apostles to the Knightwood Oak, or a patch of gorse from Picket Post to Stony Cross, that I do not know as well as I know the friends round me to-night. I was born in the Forest, and may I live and die and be buried here. I have just come back from seeing some of the finest scenery in Europe; yet, without blushing for my want of poetry, I will confess that the awful grandeur of those snow-clad mountains did not touch my heart so deeply as our beechen

glades and primrose-carpeted bottoms close at home."

There was a burst of applause after Rorie's speech that made all the orchids shiver, and nearly annihilated a thirty-guinea *Odontoglossum Vexillarium*. His talk about the Forest, irrelevant as it might be, went home to the hearts of the neighbouring landowners. But, by-and-by, in the drawing-room, when he rejoined his cousin, he found that fastidious young lady by no means complimentary.

"Your speech would have been capital half a century ago, Rorie," she said, "and you don't arra—arra—as poor papa does, which is something to be thankful for; but all that talk about the Forest seemed to me an anachronism. People are not rooted in their native soil nowadays, as they used to be in the old stage-coach times, when it was a long day's journey to London. One might as well be a vegetable at once if one is to be pinned down to one particular spot of earth. Why, the Twelve Apostles," exclaimed Mabel, innocent of irreverence, for she meant certain ancient and fast-decaying oaks

so named, "see as much of life as your fine old English gentleman. Men have wider ideas nowadays. The world is hardly big enough for their ambition."

"I would rather live in a field, and strike my roots deep down like one of those trees, than be a homeless nomad with a world-wide ambition," answered Rorie. "I have a passion for home."

"Then I wonder you spend so little time in it."

"Oh, I don't mean a home inside four walls. The Forest is my home, and Briarwood is no dearer to me than any other spot in it."

"Not so dear as the Abbey House, perhaps?"

"Well, no. I confess that fine old Tudor mansion pleases me better than this abode of straight lines and French windows, plate glass and gilt mouldings."

They sat side by side upon the amber ottoman, Rorie with Mabel's blue feather fan in his hand, twirling and twisting it as he talked, and doing more damage to that elegant article in a quarter of an hour than a twelvemonth's legitimate usage would have done. People, looking at the pretty

pair, smiled significantly, and concluded that it would be a match, and went home and told less privileged people about the evident attachment between the Duke's daughter and the young commoner. But Rorie was not strongly drawn towards his cousin this evening. It seemed to him that she was growing more and more of a paragon; and he hated paragons.

She played presently, and afterwards sang some French *chansons*. Both playing and singing were perfect of their kind. Rorie did not understand Chopin, and thought there was a good deal of unnecessary hopping about the piano in that sort of thing—nothing concrete, or that came to a focus; a succession of airy meanderings, a fairy dance in the treble, a goblin hunt in the bass. But the French *chansons*, the dainty little melodies with words of infantine innocence, all about leaves and buds, and birds'-nests and butterflies, pleased him infinitely. He hung over the piano with an enraptured air; and again his friends made note of his subjugation, and registered the fact for future discussion.

CHAPTER VI.

HOW SHE TOOK THE NEWS.

It was past midnight when the Tempest carriage drove through the dark rhododendron shrubberies up to the old Tudor porch. There was a great pile of logs burning in the hall, giving the home-comers cheery welcome. There was an antique silver spirit stand with its accompaniments on one little table for the Squire, and there was another little table on the opposite side of the hearth for Mrs. Tempest, with a dainty tea-service sparkling and shining in the red glow.

A glance at these arrangements would have told you that there were old servants at the Abbey House, servants who knew their master's and mistress's ways, and for whom service was more or less a labour of love.

"How nice," said the lady, with a contented sigh. "Pauline has thought of my cup of tea."

"And Forbes has not forgotten my soda-water," remarked the Squire.

He said nothing about the brandy, which he was pouring into the tall glass with a liberal hand.

Pauline came to take off her mistress's cloak, and was praised for her thoughtfulness about the tea, and then dismissed for the night.

The Squire liked to stretch his legs before his own fireside after dining out; and with the Squire, as with Mr. Squeers, the leg-stretching process involved the leisurely consumption of a good deal of brandy and water.

Mr. and Mrs. Tempest talked over the Briarwood dinner-party, and arrived — with perfect good nature—at the conclusion that it had been a failure.

"The dinner was excellent," said the Squire, "but the wine went round too slow; my glasses were empty half the time. That's always the way where you've a woman at the helm. She never fills her cellars properly, or trusts her butler thoroughly."

"The dresses were lovely," said Mrs. Tempest, "but everyone looked bored. How did you like

my dress, Edward? I think it's rather good style. Theodore will charge me horribly for it, I daresay."

"I don't know much about your dress, Pam, but you were the prettiest woman in the room."

"Oh Edward, at my age!" exclaimed Mrs. Tempest, with a pleased look, "when there was that lovely Lady Mabel Ashbourne."

"Do you call her lovely?—I don't. Lips too thin; waist too slim; too much blood, and too little flesh."

"Oh, but surely, Edward, she is grace itself; quite an ethereal creature. If Violet had more of that refined air——"

"Heaven forbid. Vixen is worth twenty such fine-drawn misses. Lady Mabel has been spoiled by over-training."

"Roderick is evidently in love with her," suggested Mrs. Tempest, pouring out another cup of tea.

The clocks had just struck two, the household was at rest, the logs blazed and cracked merrily, the red light shining on those mail-clad effigies in the corners, lighting up helm and hauberk, glancing

on greaves and gauntlets. It was an hour of repose and gossip which the Squire dearly loved.

Hush! what is this creeping softly down the old oak staircase? A slender white figure with cloudy hair; a small pale face, and two dark eyes shining with excitement; little feet in black velvet slippers tripping lightly upon the polished oak.

Is it a ghost? No; ghosts are noiseless, and those little slippers descend from stair to stair with a gentle pit-a-pit.

"Bless my soul and body!" cried the Squire; "what's this?"

A gush of girlish laughter was his only answer.

"Vixen!"

"Did you take me for a ghost, papa?" cried Violet, descending the last five stairs with a flying leap, and then, bounding across the hall to perch, light as a bird, upon her father's knee. "Did I really frighten you? Did you think the good old Abbey House was going to set up a family ghost; a white lady, with a dismal history of a broken heart? You darling papa! I hope you took me for a ghost!"

"Well, upon my word, you know, Vixen, I was just the least bit staggered. Your little white figure looked like something uncanny against the black oak balustrades, half in light, half in shadow."

"How nice," exclaimed Violet.

"But, my dear Violet, what can have induced you to come downstairs at such an hour?" ejaculated Mrs. Tempest in an aggrieved voice.

"I want to hear all about the party, mamma," answered Vixen coaxingly. "Do you think I could sleep a wink on the night of Rorie's coming of age? I heard the joy-bells ringing in my ears all night."

"That was very ridiculous," said Mrs. Tempest, "for there were no joy-bells after eleven o'clock yesterday."

"But they rang all the same, mamma. It was no use burying my head in the pillows; those bells only rang the louder. Ding-dong, ding-dong, dell, Rorie's come of age; ding-dong, dell, Rorie's twenty-one. Then I thought of the speeches that would be made, and I fancied I could hear Rorie speaking. Did he make a good speech, papa?"

"Capital, Vix; the only one that was worth hearing!"

"I am so glad! And did he look handsome while he was speaking? I think the Swiss sunshine has rather over-cooked him, you know; but he is not unbecomingly brown."

"He looked as handsome a young fellow as you need wish to set eyes on."

"My dear Edward," remonstrated Mrs. Tempest, languidly, too thoroughly contented with herself to be seriously vexed about anything, "do you think it is quite wise of you to encourage Violet in that kind of talk?"

"Why should she not talk of him? She never had a brother, and he stands in the place of one to her. Isn't Rorie the same to you as an elder brother, Vix?"

The girl's head was on her father's shoulder, one slim arm round his neck, her face hidden against the Squire's coat-collar. He could not see the deep warm blush that dyed his daughter's cheek at this home question.

"I don't quite know what an elder brother

would be like, papa. But I'm very fond of Rorie—when he's nice, and comes to see us before anyone else, as he did to-day."

"And when he stays away?"

"Oh, then I hate him awfully," exclaimed Vixen, with such energy that the slender figure trembled faintly as she spoke. "But tell me all about the party, mamma. Your dress was quite the prettiest, I am sure?"

"I'm not certain of that, Violet," answered Mrs. Tempest with grave deliberation, as if the question were far too serious to be answered lightly. "There was a cream-coloured silk, with silver bullion fringe, that was very striking. As a rule, I detest gold or silver trimmings; but this was really elegant. It had an effect like moonlight."

"Was that Lady Mabel Ashbourne's dress?" asked Vixen eagerly.

"No; Lady Mabel wore blue gauze—the very palest blue, all puffings and ruchings—like a cloud."

"Oh mamma! the clouds have no puffings and ruchings."

"My dear, I mean the general effect—a sort of

shadowiness which suits Lady Mabel's ethereal style."

"Ethereal!" repeated Violet thoughtfully; "you seem to admire her very much, mamma."

"Everybody admires her, my dear."

"Because she is a duke's only daughter."

"No; because she is very lovely, and extremely elegant, and most accomplished. She played and sang beautifully to-night."

"What did she play, mamma?"

"Chopin!"

"Did she!" cried Vixen. "Then I pity her. Yes, even if she were my worst enemy I should still pity her."

"People who are fond of music don't mind difficulties," said Mrs. Tempest.

"Don't they? Then I suppose I'm not fond of it, because I shirk my practice. But I should be very fond of music if I could grind it on a barrel organ."

"Oh, Violet, when will you be like Lady Mabel Ashbourne?"

"Never, I devoutly hope," said the Squire.

Here the Squire gave his daughter a hug which might mean anything.

"Never, mamma," answered Violet with conviction. "First and foremost, I never can be lovely, because I have red hair and a wide mouth. Secondly, I can never be elegant—much less ethereal—because it isn't in me. Thirdly, I shall never be accomplished, for poor Miss McCroke is always giving me up as the baddest lot in the shape of pupils that ever came in her way."

"If you persist in talking in that horrible manner, Violet——"

"Let her talk as she likes, Pam," said the fond father. "I won't have her bitted too heavily."

Mrs. Tempest breathed a gentle sigh of resignation. The Squire was all that is dear and good as husband and father, but refinement was out of his line.

"Do go on about the party, mamma. Did Rorie seem to enjoy himself very much?"

"I think so. He was very devoted to his cousin all the evening. I believe they are engaged to be married."

"Mamma!" exclaimed Vixen, starting up from her reclining attitude upon her father's shoulder, and looking intently at the speaker; "Rorie engaged to Lady Mabel Ashbourne!"

"So I am told," replied Mrs. Tempest. "It will be a splendid match for him."

The pretty chestnut head dropped back into its old place upon the Squire's shoulder, and Violet answered never a word.

"Past two o'clock," cried her mother. "This is really too dreadful. Come, Violet, you and I must go upstairs at any rate."

"We'll all go," said the Squire, finishing his second brandy and soda.

So they all three went upstairs together. Vixen had grown suddenly silent and sleepy. She yawned dolefully, and kissed her mother and father at the end of the gallery, without a word; and then scudded off, swift as a scared rabbit, to her own room.

"God bless her!" exclaimed the Squire; "she grows prettier and more winning every day."

"If her mouth were only a little smaller," sighed Mrs. Tempest.

"It's the prettiest mouth I ever saw upon woman—bar one," said the Squire.

What was Vixen doing while the fond father was praising her?

She had locked her door, and thrown herself face downwards on the carpet, and was sobbing as if her heart would break.

Rorie was going to be married. Her little kingdom had been overturned by a revolution: her little world had crumbled all to pieces. Till to-night she had been a queen in her own mind; and her kingdom had been Rorie, her subjects had begun and ended in Rorie. All was over. He belonged to someone else. She could never tyrannise over him again—never scold him and abuse him and patronise him and ridicule him any more. He was her Rorie no longer.

Had she ever thought that a time might come when he would be something more to her than playfellow and friend? No, never. The young bright mind was too childishly simple for any such

foresight or calculation. She had only thought that he was in somewise her property, and would be so till the end of both their lives. He was hers, and he was very fond of her; and she thought him a rather absurd young fellow, and looked down upon him with airs of ineffable superiority from the altitude of her childish womanliness.

And now he was gone. The earth had opened all at once and swallowed him, like that prophetic gentleman in the Greek play, whose name Vixen could never remember—chariot and horses and all. He belonged henceforth to Lady Mabel Ashbourne. She could never be rude to him any more. She could not take such a liberty with another young lady's lover.

"And to think that he should never have told me he was going to be engaged to her," she said. "He must have been fond of her from the very beginning; and he never said a word; and he let me think he rather liked me—or at least tolerated me. And how could he like two people who are the very antipodes of each other? If he is fond

of her, he must detest me. If he respects her, he must despise me."

The thought of such treachery rankled deep in the young warm heart. Vixen started up to her feet, and stood in the midst of the firelit room, with clenched fists, like a young fury. The light chestnut tresses should have been Medusa's snakes to have harmonised with that set white face. God had given Violet Tempest a heart to feel deeply, too deeply for perfect peace, or that angelic softness which seems to us most worthy in woman—the power to suffer and be patient.

CHAPTER VII.

RORIE HAS PLANS OF HIS OWN.

Roderick Vawdrey's ideas of what was due to a young man who attains his majority were in no wise satisfied by his birthday dinner-party. It had been pleasant enough in its way, but far too much after the pattern of all other dinner-parties to please a young man who hated all common and hackneyed things, and all the beaten tracks of life —or who, at any rate, fancied he did, which comes to nearly the same thing.

"Mother," he began at breakfast next morning, in his loud cheery voice, "we must have something for the small tenants, and shopkeepers, and cottagers."

"What do you mean, Roderick?"

"Some kind of entertainment to celebrate my majority. The people will expect it. Last night

polished off the swells very nicely. The whole thing did you credit, mother."

"Thank you," said Lady Jane, with a slight contraction of her thin lips.

This November morning, so pleasant for Rorie, was rather a bitter day for his mother. She had been reigning sovereign at Briarwood hitherto; henceforth she could only live there on sufferance. The house was Rorie's. Even the orchid-houses were his. He might take her to task if he pleased for having spent so much money on glass.

"But I must have my humble friends round me," continued Rorie. "The young people, too—the boys and girls. I'll tell you what, mother. We must have a lawn meet. The hounds have never met here since my grandfather's time—fifty years ago. The Duke's stud-groom was telling me about it last year. He's a Hampshire man, you know, born and bred in the Forest. We'll have a lawn meet and a hunting breakfast; and it shall be open house for everyone—high and low, rich and poor, gentle and simple. Don't be frightened, mother," interjected Rorie, seeing Lady Jane's

look of horror; "we won't do any mischief. Your gardens shall be respected."

"They are your gardens now, Roderick. You are sole master here, and can do what you please."

"My dear mother, how can you talk like that? Do you suppose I shall ever forget who made the place what it is? The gardens have been your particular hobby, and they shall be your gardens to the end of time."

"That is very generous of you, my dear Roderick; but you are promising too much. When you marry, your wife will be mistress of Briarwood, and it will be necessary for me to find a new home."

"I am in no hurry to get married. It will be half-a-dozen years before I shall even think of anything so desperate."

"I hope not, Roderick. With your position and your responsibilities you ought to marry young. Marriage—a suitable marriage, that is to say—would give you an incentive to earnestness and ambition. I want to see you follow in your

father's footsteps; I want you to make a name by-and-by."

"I'm afraid it will be a distant by-and-by," said Rorie, with a yawn. "I don't feel at all drawn towards the senate. I love the country, my dogs, my horses, the free fresh air, the stir and movement of life too well to pen myself up in a study and pore over blue-books, or to waste the summer evenings listening to the member for Little Peddlington laying down the law about combination drainage, or the proposed loop-line that is intended to connect his borough with the world in general. I'm afraid it isn't in me, mother, and that you'll be sorely disappointed if you set your heart upon my making a figure as a senator."

"I should like to see you worthy of your father's name," Lady Jane said, with a regretful sigh.

"Providence hasn't made me after the same pattern," answered Rorie. "Look at my grandfather's portrait over the mantelpiece, in pink and mahogany tops. What a glorious fellow he must have been. You should hear how the old people

talk of him. I think I inherit his tastes, instead of my father's. Hereditary genius crops up in curious ways, you know. Perhaps, if I have a son, he will be a heaven-born statesman, and you may have your ambition gratified by a grandson. And now about the hunting breakfast. Would this day week suit you?"

"This is your house, Roderick. It is for you to give your orders."

"Bosh!" exclaimed the son impatiently. "Don't I tell you that you are mistress here, and will be mistress——"

"My dear Roderick, let us look things straight in the face," said Lady Jane. "If I were sole mistress here there would be no hunting breakfast. It is just the very last kind of entertainment I should ever dream of giving. I am not complaining, mind. It is natural enough for you to like that kind of thing; and, as master of this house, it is your right to invite whomsoever you please. I am quite happy that it should be so, but let there be no more talk about my being mistress of this house. That is too absurd."

Rorie felt all his most generous impulses turned to a sense of constraint and bitterness. He could say no more.

"Will you give me a list of the people you would like to be asked," said his mother, after rather an uncomfortable silence.

"I'll go and talk it over with the Duke," answered Rorie. "He'll enter into the spirit of the thing."

Rorie found the Duke going the round of his loose-boxes, and uncle and nephew spent an hour together pleasantly, overhauling the fine stud of hunters which the Duke kept at Ashbourne, and going round the paddocks to look at the brood-mares and their foals; these latter being eccentric little animals, all head and legs, which nestled close to the mother's side for a minute, and then took fright at the whisking of their own tails, and shot off across the field, like a skyrocket travelling horizontally, or suddenly stood up on end, and executed a wild waltz in mid air.

The Duke and Roderick decided which among these leggy little beasts possessed the elements of

future excellence; and after an hour's perambulation of the paddocks they went to the house, where they found the Duchess and Lady Mabel in the morning-room; the Duchess busy making scarlet cloth cloaks for her school-children, Lady Mabel reading a German critic on Shakespeare.

Here the hunt breakfast was fully discussed. Everybody was to be asked. The Duchess put in a plea for her school-children. It would be such a treat for the little things to see the hounds, and their red cloaks and hoods would look so pretty on the lawn.

"Let them come, by all means," said Roderick; "your school—half-a-dozen schools. I'll have three or four tents rigged up for refreshments. There shall be plenty to eat and drink for everybody. And now I'm off to the Tempests' to arrange about the hounds. The Squire will be pleased, I know."

"Of course," said Lady Mabel, "and the Squire's daughter."

"Dear little thing," exclaimed Rorie, with an elder brother's tenderness; "she'll be as

pleased as Punch. You'll hunt, of course, Mabel?"

"I don't know. I don't shine in the field, as Miss Tempest does."

"Oh, but you must come, Mab. The Duke will find you a safe mount."

"She has a hunter I bred on purpose for her," said the Duke; "but she'll never be such a horsewoman as her mother."

"She looks lovely on Mazeppa," said Rorie; "and she must come to my hunting breakfast."

"Of course, Rorie, if you really wish it I shall come."

Rorie stayed to luncheon, and then went back to Briarwood to mount his horse and ride to the Abbey House.

The afternoon was drawing in when Rorie rode up to the old Tudor porch—a soft, sunless, gray afternoon. The door stood open, and he saw the glow of the logs on the wide hearth, and the Squire's stalwart figure sitting in the great arm-chair, leaning forward with a newspaper across his knee, and

Vixen on a stool at his feet, the dogs grouped about them.

"Shall I send my horse round to the stables, Squire?" asked Rorie.

"Do, my lad," answered Mr. Tempest, ringing the bell, at which summons a man appeared and took charge of Roderick's big chestnut.

"Been hunting to-day, Squire?" asked Rorie, when he had shaken hands with Mr. Tempest and his daughter, and seated himself on the opposite side of the hearth.

"No," answered the Squire, in a voice that had a duller sound than usual. "We had the hounds out this morning at Hilberry Green, and there was a good muster, Jack Purdy says; but I felt out of sorts, and neither Vixen nor I went. It was a loss for Vixen, poor little girl."

"It was a grief to see you ill, papa," said Violet, nestling closer to him.

She had hardly taken any notice of Roderick to-day, shaking hands with him in an absent-minded way, evidently full of anxiety about her father. She was very pale, and looked older and more

womanly than when he saw her yesterday, Roderick thought.

"I'm not ill, my dear," said the Squire, "only a little muddled and queer in my head; been riding too hard lately, perhaps. I don't get lighter, you know, Rorie, and a quick run shakes me more than it used. Old Martin, our family doctor, has been against my hunting for a long time; but I should like to know what kind of life men of my age would lead if they listened to the doctors. They wouldn't let us have a decent dinner."

"I'm so sorry," said Rorie; "I came to ask you a favour, and now I feel as if I hardly ought to say anything about it."

And then Roderick proceeded to tell the Squire his views about a lawn meet at Briarwood, and a hunting breakfast for rich and poor.

"It shall be done, my boy," answered the Squire heartily. "It's just the sort of thing you ought to do to make yourself popular. Lady Jane is a charming woman, you know, thoroughbred to the finger-nails; but she has kept herself a little too much to herself. There are people old enough

to remember what Briarwood was in your grandfather's time. This day week you say? I'll arrange everything. We'll have such a gathering as hasn't been seen for the last twenty years."

"Vixen must come with you," said Rorie.

"Of course."

"If papa is well and strong enough to hunt."

"My love, there is nothing amiss with me—nothing that need trouble me this day week. A man may have a headache, mayn't he, child, without people making any fuss about it?"

"I should like you to see Dr. Martin, papa. Don't you think he ought to see the doctor, Rorie? It's not natural for him to be ill."

"I'm not going to be put upon half-rations, Vixen. Martin would starve me. That's his only idea of medical treatment. Yes, Vixen shall come, Rorie."

CHAPTER VIII.

GLAS IST DER ERDE STOLZ UND GLÜCK.

The morning of the Briarwood Meet dawned fairly. Roderick watched the first lifting of the darkness from his bed-room window, and rejoiced in the promise of fine weather. The heavens, which had been so unpropitious upon his birthday, seemed to promise better things to-day. He did not desire the traditional hunting morning—a southerly wind and a cloudy sky. He cared very little about the scent lying well, or the actual result of the day's sport. He wanted rather to see the kind familiar faces round him, the autumn sunshine lighting up all the glow and colour of the picture, the scarlet coats, the rich bay and brown of the horses, the verdant background of lawn and shrubberies. Two huge marquees had been erected for the commonalty—one for the school-children, the other for the villagers. There were long tables in the

billiard-room for the farming class; and for the quality there was the horse-shoe table in the dining-room, as at Roderick's birthday dinner. But on this occasion the table was decorated only with hardy ferns and flowers. The orchids were not allowed to appear.

Roderick noticed the omission.

"Why, where are the thing-um-tites, mother?" he asked, with some surprise; "the pitcher-plants, and tropical what's-its-names?"

"I did not think there was any occasion to have them brought out of the houses, Roderick," Lady Jane answered quietly; "there is always a risk of their being killed, or some of your sporting friends might be picking my prize blossoms to put in their button-holes. Men who give their minds to horses would hardly appreciate orchids."

"All right, mother. As long as there is plenty to eat, I don't suppose it much matters," answered Rorie.

He had certainly no cause for complaint upon this score. Briarwood had been amply provisioned

for an unlimited hospitality. The red coats and green coats, and blue coats and brown coats, came in and out, slashed away at boar's head and truffled turkey, sent champagne corks flying, and added more dead men to the formidable corps of tall hock bottles, dressed in uniform brown, which the astonished butler ranged rank and file in a lobby outside the dining-room. He had never seen this kind of thing at Briarwood since he had kept the keys of the cellars; and he looked upon this promiscuous hospitality with a disapproving eye.

The Duke supported his nephew admirably, and was hail-fellow-well-met with everybody. He had always been popular at Ashbourne. It was his own place, his particular selection, bought with his own money, improved under his own eye, and he liked it better than any of his hereditary seats.

"If I had only had a son like you, Rorie," he said, as he stood beside the young man, on the gravel sweep before the hall-door, welcoming the new-comers, "I should have been a happy man.

Well, I suppose I must be satisfied with a grandson; but it's a hard thing that the title and estates are to go to that scamp of a cousin of mine."

Roderick, on this particular morning, was a nephew whom any uncle might be proud to own. His red coat and buckskins became him; so did his position as host and master at Briarwood. His tall erect figure showed to advantage amidst the crowd. His smile lit up the dark sunburnt face like sunshine. He had a kind word, a friendly hand-clasp for everybody—even for gaffers and goodies who had hobbled from their village shanties to see the sport, and to get their share of cold sirloin and old October. He took the feeble old creatures into the tent, and saw that they found a place at the board.

Squire Tempest and his daughter were among the later arrivals. The meet was to be at one, and they only rode into the grounds at half-past twelve, when everyone else had breakfasted. Mrs. Tempest had not come. The entertainment was much too early for a lady who never left her rooms till afternoon.

Vixen looked lovely in her smart little habit. It was not the Lincoln green with the brass buttons, which Lady Mabel had laughed at a year ago. To-day Miss Tempest wore a dark brown habit, moulded to the full erect figure, with a narrow rim of white at the throat, a little felt hat of the same dark brown with a brown feather, long white gauntlets, and a whip with a massive ivory handle.

The golden bay's shining coat matched Violet's shining hair. It was the prettiest picture in the world, the rider in dark brown on the bright bay horse, the daintily quilted saddle, the gauntleted hands playing so lightly with the horse's velvet mouth—horse and rider devotedly attached to each other.

"How do you like him?" asked Vixen, directly she and Rorie had shaken hands. "Isn't he absolutely lovely?"

"Absolutely lovely," said Rorie, patting the horse's shoulder and looking at the rider.

"Papa gave him to me on my last birthday. I was to have ridden Titmouse another year; but I got the brush one day after a hard run when almost

everybody else was left behind, and papa said I should have a horse. Poor Titmouse is put into a basket-chaise. Isn't it sad for him?"

"Awfully humiliating."

Lady Mabel was close by on her chestnut thoroughbred, severely costumed in darkest blue and chimney-pot hat.

"I don't think you've ever met my cousin?" said Rorie. "Mabel, this is Miss Tempest, whom you've heard me talk about. Miss Tempest, Lady Mabel Ashbourne."

Violet Tempest gave a startled look, and blushed crimson. Then the two girls bowed and smiled: a constrained smile on Vixen's part, a prim and chilly smile from Lady Mabel.

"I want you two to be awful good friends," said Rorie; "and when you come out, Vixen, Lady Mabel will take you under her wing. She knows everybody, and the right thing to be done on every occasion."

Vixen turned from red to pale, and said nothing. Lady Mabel looked at the distant blue line of the Wight, and murmured that she would be happy to

be of use to Miss Tempest if ever they met in London. Rorie felt, somehow, that it was not encouraging. Vixen stole a glance at her rival. Yes, she was very pretty—a delicate patrician beauty which Vixen had never seen before. No wonder Rorie was in love with her. Where else could he have seen anything so exquisite? It was the most natural thing in the world that these cousins should be fond of each other, and engaged to be married. Vixen wondered that the thing had never occurred to her as inevitable—that it should have come upon her as a blow at the last.

"I think Rorie ought to have told me," she said to herself. "He is like my brother; and a brother would not hide his love affairs from his sister. It was rather mean of Rorie."

The business of the day began presently. Neither Vixen nor the Squire dismounted. They had breakfasted at home; and Vixen, who did not care much for Lady Jane Vawdrey, was glad to escape with no further communication than a smile and a bow. At a quarter-past one they were all

riding away towards the Forest, and presently the serious business began.

Vixen and her father were riding side by side.

"You are so pale, papa. Is your head bad again to-day?"

"Yes, my dear. I'm afraid I've started a chronic headache. But the fresh air will blow it away presently, I daresay. You're not looking over-well yourself, Vixen. What have you done with your roses?"

"I—I—don't care much about hunting to-day, papa," said Violet, sudden tears rushing into her eyes. "Shall we go home together? You're not well, and I'm not enjoying myself. Nobody wants us, either; so why should we stay?"

Rorie was a little way behind them, taking care of Lady Mabel, whose slim-legged chestnut went through as many manœuvres as if he had been doing the *manége* business in a circus, and got over the ground very slowly.

"Nonsense, child! Go back! I should think not! Jack Purdy may do all the work, but people like to see me to the fore. We shall find down

in Dingley Bottom, I daresay, and get a capital run across the hills to Beaulieu."

They found just as the Squire had anticipated, and after that there was a hard run for the next hour and a quarter. Roderick was at the heel of the hunt all the time, opening gates, and keeping his cousin out of bogs and dangers of all kinds. They killed at last on a wild bit of common near Beaulieu, and there were only a few in at the death, amongst them Vixen on her fast young bay, flushed with excitement and triumph by this time, and forgetting all her troubles in the delight of winning one of the pads. Mrs. Millington, the famous huntress from the shires, was there to claim the brush.

"How tired you look, papa," said Vixen, as they rode quietly homewards.

"A little done up, my dear, but a good dinner will set me all right again. It was a capital run, and your horse behaved beautifully. I don't think I made a bad choice for you. Rorie and his cousin were miles behind, I daresay. Pretty girl, and

sits her horse like a picture—but she can't ride. No hands. We shall meet them going home, perhaps."

A mile or two farther on they met Roderick alone. His cousin had gone home with her father.

"It was rather a bore losing the run," he said, as he turned his horse's head and rode by Vixen, "but I was obliged to take care of my cousin."

One of the Squire's tenants, a seventeen-stone farmer, on a stout gray cob, overtook them presently, and Mr. Tempest rode on by his side, talking agricultural talk about over-fed beasts and cattle shows, the last popular form of cruelty to animals.

Roderick and Violet were alone, riding slowly side by side in the darkening gray, between woods where solitary robins carolled sweetly, or the rare gurgle of the thrush sounded now and then from thickets of beech and holly.

A faint colour came back to Vixen's cheek. She was very angry with her playfellow for his want of confidence, for his unfriendly reserve. Yet this was the one happy hour of her day

There had been a flavour of desolateness and abandonment in all the rest.

"I hope you enjoyed the run," said Rorie.

"I don't think you can care much whether we did or didn't," retorted Vixen, shrouding her personality in a vague plural. "If you had cared you would have been with us. Sultan," meaning the chestnut, "must have felt cruelly humiliated by being kept so far behind."

"If a man could be in two places at once, half of me, the better half of me, would have been with you, Vixen; but I was bound to take care of my cousin. I had insisted upon her coming."

"Of course," answered Vixen, with a little toss of her head; "it would have been quite wrong if she had been absent."

They rode on in silence for a little while after this. Vixen was longing to say: "Rorie, you have treated me very badly. You ought to have told me you were going to be married." But something restrained her. She patted her horse's neck, listened to the lonely robins, and said not a word.

The Squire and his tenant were a hundred yards ahead, talking loudly.

Presently they came to a point at which their roads parted, but Rorie still rode on by Vixen.

"Isn't that your nearest way?" asked Vixen, pointing down the cross-road with the ivory handle of her whip.

"I am not going the nearest way. I am going to the Abbey House with you."

"I wouldn't be so rude as to say Don't, but I think poor Sultan must be tired."

"Sultan shall have a by-day to-morrow."

They went into an oak plantation, where a broad open alley led from one side of the enclosure to the other. The wood had a mysterious look in the late afternoon, when the shadows were thickening under the tall thin trees. There was an all-pervading ghostly grayness as in a shadowy underworld. They rode silently over the thick wet carpet of fallen leaves, the horses starting a little now and then at the aspect of a newly-barked trunk lying white across the track. They were silent, having, in sooth, very little to say to each

other just at this time. Vixen was nursing her wrathful feelings; Rorie felt that his future was confused and obscure. He ought to do something with his life, perhaps, as his mother had so warmly urged. But his soul was stirred by no ambitious promptings.

They were within two hundred yards of the gate at the end of the enclosure, when Vixen gave a sudden cry:

"Did papa's horse stumble?" she asked; "look how he sways in his saddle."

Another instant, and the Squire reeled forward, and fell headforemost across his horse's shoulder. The fall was so sudden and so heavy, that the horse fell with him, and then scrambled up on to his feet again affrighted, swung himself round, and rushed past Roderick and Vixen along the plashy track.

Vixen was off her horse in a moment, and had flown to her father's side. He lay like a log, face downwards upon the sodden leaves just inside the gate. The farmer had dismounted and was stooping over him, bridle in hand, with a frightened face.

"Oh, what is it?" cried Violet frantically. "Did the horse throw him?—Bullfinch, his favourite horse. Is he much hurt? Oh, help me to lift him up—help me—help me!"

Rorie was by her side by this time, kneeling down with her beside the prostrate Squire, trying to raise the heavy figure which lay like lead across his arm.

"It wasn't the horse, miss," said the farmer. "I'm afraid it's a seizure."

"A fit!" cried Vixen. "Oh, papa, papa——darling—darling——"

She was sobbing, clinging to him, trembling like a leaf, and turning a white stricken face up towards Roderick.

"Do something to help him—for God's sake—do something," she cried; "you won't let him lie there and die for want of help. Some brandy—something," she gasped, stretching out her trembling hand."

The farmer had anticipated her thought. He had taken his flask from the saddle pocket, and was kneeling down by the Squire. Roderick had

lifted the heavy head, and turned the ghastly face to the waning light. He tried to force a little brandy between the livid lips—but vainly.

"For God's sake get her away," he whispered to John Wimble, the farmer. "It's all over with him."

"Come away with me, my dear Miss Tempest," said Wimble, trying to raise Violet from her knees beside the Squire. She was gazing into that awful face distractedly—half divining its solemn meaning—yet watching for the kind eyes to open and look at her again. "Come away with me, and we'll get a doctor. Mr. Vawdrey will take care of your father."

"You go for the doctor," she answered firmly. "I'll stay with papa. Take my horse, he's faster than yours. Oh, he'll carry you well enough. You don't know how strong he is—go, quick—quick—Dr. Martin, at Lyndhurst—it's a long way, but you must get him. Papa will recover, and be able to ride home, perhaps, before you can get back to us, but go, go."

"You go for the doctor, miss; your horse will

carry you fast enough. He'd never carry such a heavy weight as me, and my cob is dead beat. You go, and Mr. Vawdrey will go with you. I'll take care of the Squire."

Violet looked from one to the other helplessly.

"I'd rather stay with papa," she said. "You go, Rorie—yes—go, go. I'll stay with papa."

She crouched down beside the prostrate figure on the damp marshy ground, took the heavy head on her lap, and looked up at the two men with a pale set face which indicated a resolve that neither of them was strong enough to overrule. They tried their utmost to persuade her, but in vain. She was fixed as a new Niobe—a stony image of young despair. So Roderick mounted his horse and rode off towards Lyndhurst, and honest Jack Wimble tied the other two horses to the gate, and took his stand beside them, a few paces from those two motionless figures on the ground, patiently waiting for the issue of this bitter hour.

It was one of the longest, weariest, saddest hours that ever youth and hope lived through. There was an awful heart-sickening fear in Violet's

mind, but she gave it no definite shape. She would not say to herself, "My father is dead." The position in which he was lying hampered her arms so that she could not reach out her hand to lay it upon his heart. She bent her face down to his lips.

Oh God! not a flutter stirred upon her soft cheek as she laid it against those pallid lips. The lower jaw had fallen in an awful-looking way; but Violet had seen her father look like that sometimes as he slept, with open mouth, before the hall fire. It might be only a long swoon, a suspension of consciousness. Dr. Martin would come presently—oh, how long, how long the time seemed—and make all things right.

The crescent moon shone silver pale above that dim gray wood. The barked trunks gleamed white and spectral in the gathering dark. Owls began to hoot in the distance, frogs were awaking near at hand, belated rabbits flitted ghost-like across the track. All nature seemed of one gray shadowy hue—silvery where the moonbeams fell.

The November air was chill and penetrating.

There was a dull aching in Violet's limbs from the weight of her burden, but she was hardly conscious of physical pain. It seemed to her that she had been sitting there for hours waiting for the doctor's help. She thought the night must have nearly worn itself out.

"Dr. Martin could not have been at home," she said, speaking for the first time since Roderick rode away. "Mr. Vawdrey would fetch someone else, surely."

"My dear young lady, he hasn't had time to ride to Lyndhurst yet."

"Not yet," cried Vixen despairingly, "not yet! And it has been so long. Papa is getting so cold. The chill will be so bad for him."

"Worse for you, miss; I do wish you'd let me take you home."

"And leave papa here—alone—unconscious! How can you be so cruel as to think of such a thing?"

"Dear Miss Tempest, we're not doing him any good, and you may be getting a chill that will be nigh your death. If you would only go home to

your mamma, now—it's hard upon her not to know —she'll be fretting about you, I daresay."

"Don't waste your breath talking to me," cried Vixen indignantly; "I shall not leave this spot till papa goes with me."

They waited for another quarter of an hour in dismal silence. The horses gnawed the lower branches of the trees, and gave occasional evidence of their impatience. Bullfinch had gone home to his stable no doubt. They were only about a mile-and-a-half from the Abbey House.

Hark! what was that? The splish-splash of horses' hoofs on the soft turf. Another minute and Rorie rode up to the gate with a stranger.

"I was lucky enough to meet this gentleman," he said, "a doctor from Southampton, who was at the hunt to-day. Violet dear, will you let me take you home now, and leave the doctor and Mr. Wimble with your father?"

"No," answered Vixen decisively.

The strange doctor knelt down and looked at his patient. He was a middle-aged man, grave-looking, with iron-gray hair—a man who impressed

Vixen with a sense of power and authority. She looked at him silently, with a despairing appealing look that thrilled him, familiar as he was with such looks. He made his examination quietly, saying not a word, and keeping his face hidden. Then he turned to the two men who were standing close by, watching him anxiously.

"You must get some kind of litter to carry him home," he whispered.

And then with gentle firmness, with strong irresistible hands, he separated the living from the dead, lifted Violet from the ground and led her towards her horse.

"You must let Mr. Vawdrey take you home, my dear young lady," he said. "You can do nothing here."

"But you—you can do something," sobbed Violet, "you will bring him back to life—you——"

"I will do all that can be done," answered the doctor gently.

His tone told her more than his words. She gave one wild shriek, and threw herself down

beside her dead father. A cloud came over the distracted brain, and she lay there senseless. The doctor and Rorie lifted her up and carried her to the gate where her horse was waiting. The doctor forced a little brandy through her locked lips, and between them Rorie and he placed her in the saddle. She had just consciousness enough by this time to hold the bridle mechanically, and to sit upright on her horse; and thus led by Roderick, she rode slowly back to the home that was never any more to be the same home that she had known and lived in through the joyous sixteen years of her life. All things were to be different to her henceforward. The joy of life was broken short off, like a flower snapped from its stem.

CHAPTER IX.

A HOUSE OF MOURNING.

THERE was sorrow at the Abbey House deeper and wilder than had entered within those doors for many a year. To Mrs. Tempest the shock of her husband's death was overwhelming. Her easy, luxurious, monotonous life had been very sweet to her, but her husband had been the dearest part of life. She had taken little trouble to express her love for him, quite willing that he should take it for granted. She had been self-indulgent and vain; seeking her own ease, spending money and care on her own adornment; but she had not forgotten to make the Squire's life pleasant to him also. Newly-wedded lovers in the fair honeymoon-stage of existence could not have been fonder of each other than the middle-aged Squire and his somewhat faded wife. His loving eyes had never seen Time's changes in Pamela Tempest's pretty face,

the lessening brightness of the eyes, the duller tints of the complexion, the loss of youth's glow and glory. To him she had always appeared the most beautiful woman in the world.

And now the fondly-indulged wife could do nothing but lie on her sofa and shed a rain of incessant tears, and drink strong tea, which had lost its power to comfort or exhilarate. She would see no one. She could not even be roused to interest herself in her mourning, though, with a handsome widow, Pauline thought that ought to be all important.

"There are so many styles of widows' caps now, ma'am. You really ought to see them, and choose for yourself," urged Pauline, an honest young Englishwoman, who had begun life as Polly, but whom Mrs. Tempest had elevated into Pauline.

"What does it matter, Pauline? Take anything you like. *He* will not be there to see."

Here the ready tears flowed afresh. That was the bitterest of all. That she should look nice in her mourning, and Edward not be there to praise her. In her feebleness she could not imagine life without

him. She would hear his step at her door surely, his manly voice in the corridor. She would awake from this awful dream, in which he was not, and find him, and fall into his arms, and sob out her grief upon his breast, and tell him all she had suffered.

That was the dominant feeling in this weak soul. He could not be gone for ever.

Yet the truth came back upon her in hideous distinctness every now and then—came back suddenly and awfully, like the swift revelation of a desolate plague-stricken scene under a lightning flash. He was gone. He was lying in his coffin, in the dear old Tudor hall where they had sat so cosily. Those dismal reiterated strokes of the funeral-bell meant that his burial was at hand. They were moving the coffin already, perhaps. His place knew him no more.

She tottered to the darkened window, lifted the edge of the blind, and looked out. The funeral train was moving slowly along the carriage sweep, through the winding shrubberied road. How long, and black, and solemnly splendid the procession

looked. Everybody had loved and respected him. It was a grand funeral. The thought of this general homage gave a faint thrill of comfort to the widow's heart.

"My noble husband," she ejaculated. "Who could help loving you?"

It seemed to her only a little while ago that she had driven up to the Tudor porch for the first time after her happy honeymoon, when she was in the bloom of youth and beauty, and life was like a schoolgirl's happy dream.

"How short life is," she sobbed; "how cruelly short for those who are happy!"

With Violet grief was no less passionate; but it did not find its sole vent in tears. The stronger soul was in rebellion against Providence. She kept aloof from her mother in the time of sorrow. What could they say to each other? They could only cry together. Violet shut herself in her room, and refused to see anyone, except patient Miss McCroke, who was always bringing her cups of tea, or basins of arrowroot, trying to coax her to take some kind of nourishment, dabbing her hot

forehead with eau-de-cologne—doing all those fussy little kindnesses which are so acutely aggravating in a great sorrow.

"Let me lie on the ground alone, and think of him, and wail for him."

That is what Violet Tempest would have said, if she could have expressed her desire clearly.

Roderick Vawdrey went back to the Abbey House after the funeral, and contrived to see Miss McCroke, who was full of sympathy for everybody.

"Do let me see Violet, that's a dear creature," he said. "I can't tell you how unhappy I am about her. I can't get her face out of my thoughts, as I saw it that dreadful night when I led her horse home—the wild sad eyes, the white lips."

"She is not fit to see anyone," said Miss McCroke; "but perhaps it might rouse her a little to see you."

Miss McCroke had an idea that all mourners ought to be roused; that much indulgence in grief for the dead was reprehensible.

"Yes," answered Rorie eagerly, "she would see me, I know. We are like brother and sister."

"Come into the schoolroom," said the governess, "and I'll see what I can do."

The schoolroom was Vixen's own particular den, and was not a bit like the popular idea of a schoolroom.

It was a pretty little room, with a high wooden dado, painted olive green, and a high-art paper of amazing ugliness, whereon brown and red storks disported themselves on a dull green ground. The high-art paper was enlivened with horsey caricatures by Leech, and a menagerie of pottery animals on various brackets.

A pot or a pan had been stuck into every corner that would hold one. There were desks, and boxes, and wickerwork baskets of every shape and kind, a dwarf oak bookcase on either side of the fireplace, with the books all at sixes and sevens, leaning against each other as if they were intoxicated. The broad mantelpiece presented a confusion of photographs, cups and saucers, violet jars, and Dresden shepherdesses. Over the quaint old Venetian glass dangled Vixen's first trophy, the fox's brush, tied with a scarlet ribbon. There were no birds, or

squirrels, or dormice, for Vixen was too fond of the animal creation to shut her favourites up in cages; but there was a black bearskin spread in a corner for Argus to lie upon. In the wide low windows there were two banks of bright autumn flowers, pompons and dwarf roses, mignonette and veronica.

Miss McCroke drew up the blind, and stirred the fire.

"I'll go and ask her to come," she said.

"Do, like a dear," said Rorie.

He paced the room while she was gone, full of sadness. He had been very fond of the Squire, and that awfully sudden death, an apoplectic seizure, instantaneous as a thunderbolt, had impressed him very painfully. It was his first experience of the kind, and it was infinitely terrible to him. It seemed to him a long time before Vixen appeared, and then the door opened, and a slim black figure came in, a white fixed face looked at him piteously, with tearless eyes made big by a great grief. She came leaning on Miss McCroke, as if she could hardly walk unaided. The face was stranger to him than an altogether unknown face. It was

Violet Tempest with all the vivid joyous life gone out of her, like a lamp that is extinguished.

He took her cold trembling hands and drew her gently to a chair, and sat down beside her.

"I wanted so much to see you, dear," he said, "to tell you how sorry we all are for you—my mother, my aunt, and cousin"—Violet gave a faint shiver—"all of us. The Duke liked your dear father so much. It was quite a shock to him."

"You are very good," Violet said mechanically.

She sat by him, pale and still as marble, looking at the ground. His voice and presence impressed her but faintly, like something a long way off. She was thinking of her dead father. She saw nothing but that one awful figure. They had laid him in his grave by this time. The cold cruel earth had fallen upon him and hidden him for ever from the light; he was shut away for ever from the fair glad world; he who had been so bright and cheerful, whose presence had carried gladness everywhere.

"Is the funeral quite over?" she asked presently, without lifting her heavy eyelids.

"Yes, dear. It was a noble funeral. Everybody was there—rich and poor. Everybody loved him."

"The poor most of all," she said. "I know how good he was to them."

Somebody knocked at the door and asked something of Miss McCroke, which obliged the governess to leave her pupil. Roderick was glad at her departure. That substantial figure in its new black dress had been a hindrance to freedom of conversation.

Miss McCroke's absence did not loosen Violet's tongue. She sat looking at the ground, and was dumb. That silent grief was very awful to Roderick.

"Violet, why don't you talk to me about your sorrow," he said. "Surely you can trust me—your friend—your brother!"

That last word stung her into speech. The hazel eyes shot a swift angry glance at him.

"You have no right to call yourself that," she said, "you have not treated me like a sister."

"How not, dear?"

"You should have told me about your engagement—that you were going to marry Lady Mabel Ashbourne."

"Should I?" exclaimed Rorie, amazed. "If I had I should have told you an arrant falsehood. I am not engaged to my cousin Mabel. I am not going to marry her."

"Oh, it doesn't matter in the least whether you are or not," returned Vixen, with a weary air. "Papa is dead, and trifles like that can't affect me now. But I felt it unkind of you at the time I heard it."

"And where and how did you hear this wonderful news, Vixen?" asked Rorie, very pleased to get her thoughts away from her grief, were it only for a minute.

"Mamma told me that everybody said you were engaged, and that the fact was quite obvious."

"What everybody says, and what is quite obvious, is very seldom true, Violet. You may take that for a first principle in social science. I am not engaged to anyone. I have no thought of getting married—for the next three years."

Vixen received this information with chilling silence. She would have been very glad to hear it, perhaps, a week ago—at which time she had found it a sore thing to think of her old playfellow as Lady Mabel's affianced husband—but it mattered nothing now. The larger grief had swallowed up all smaller grievances. Roderick Vawdrey had receded into remote distance. He was no one, nothing, in a world that was suddenly emptied of all delight.

"What are you going to do, dear?" asked Roderick presently. "If you shut yourself up in your room and abandon yourself to grief, you will make yourself very ill. You ought to go away somewhere for a little while."

"For ever!" exclaimed Vixen passionately. "Do you think I can ever endure this dear home without papa? There is not a thing I look at that doesn't speak to me of him. The dogs, the horses. I almost hate them for reminding me so cruelly. Yes, we are going away at once, I believe. Mamma said so when I saw her this morning."

"Your poor mamma! How does she bear her grief?"

"Oh, she cries, and cries, and cries," said Vixen, rather contemptuously. "I think it comforts her to cry. I can't cry. I am like the dogs. If I did not restrain myself with all my might I should howl. I should like to lie on the ground outside his door—just as his dog does—and to refuse to eat or drink till I died."

"But, dear Violet, you are not alone in the world. You have your poor mamma to think of."

"Mamma—yes. I am sorry for her, of course. But she is only like a lay-figure in my life. Papa was everything."

"Do you know where your mamma is going to take you?"

"No; I neither know nor care. It will be to a house with four walls and a roof, I suppose. It will be all the same to me wherever it is."

What could Roderick say? It was too soon to talk about hope or comfort. His heart was rent by this dull silent grief; but he could do nothing except sit there silently by Vixen's side with her cold unresponsive hands held in his.

Miss McCroke came back presently, followed by a maid carrying a pretty Japanese tea-tray.

"I have just been giving your poor mamma a cup of tea, Violet," said the governess. "Mr. Clements has been telling her about the will, and it has been quite too much for her. She was almost hysterical. But she's better now, poor dear. And now we'll all have some tea. Bring the table to the fire, Mr. Vawdrey, please, and let us make ourselves comfortable," concluded Miss McCroke with an assumption of mild cheerfulness.

Perhaps there is not in all nature so cheerful a thing as a good sea-coal fire, with a log of beech-wood on the top of the coals. It will be cheerful in the face of affliction. It sends out its gushes of warmth and brightness, its gay little arrowy flames that appear and disappear like elves dancing their midnight waltzes on a barren moor. It seems to say: "Look at me and be comforted! Look at me and hope! So from the dull blackness of sorrow rise the many coloured lights of new-born joy."

Vixen suffered her chair to be brought near

that cheery fire, and just then Argus crept into the room and nestled at her knee. Roderick seated himself at the other side of the hearth—a bright little fireplace with its border of high-art tiles, illuminated with the story of "Mary, Mary, quite contrary," after quaintly mediæval designs, by Mr. Stacey Marks. Miss McCroke poured out the tea in the quaint old red and blue Worcester cups, and valiantly sustained that assumption of cheerfulness. She would not have permitted herself to smile yesterday; but now the funeral was over, the blinds were drawn up, and a mild cheerfulness was allowable.

"If you would condescend to tell me where you are going, Vixen, I might contrive to come there too, by-and-by. We could have some rides together. You'll take Arion, of course."

"I don't know that I shall ever ride again," answered Violet with a shudder.

Could she ever forget that awful ride? Roderick hated himself for his foolish speech.

"Violet will have to devote herself to her studies very assiduously for the next two years,"

said Miss McCroke. "She is much more backward than I like a pupil of mine to be at sixteen."

"Yes, I am going to grind at three or four foreign grammars, and to give my mind to latitude and longitude, and fractions, and decimals," said Vixen, with a bitter laugh. "Isn't that cheering?"

"Whatever you do, Vixen," cried Roderick earnestly, "don't be a paradigm."

"What's that?"

"An example, a model, a paragon, a perfect woman, nobly planned, &c. Be anything but that, Vixen, if you love me."

"I don't think there is much fear of any of us being perfect," said Miss McCroke severely. "Imperfection is more in the line of humanity."

"Do you think so?" interrogated Rorie. "I find there is a great deal too much perfection in this world, too many faultless people—I hate them."

"Isn't that a confession of faultiness on your side?" suggested Miss McCroke.

"It may be. But it's the truth."

Vixen sat with dry hollow eyes staring at the fire. She had heard their talk as if it had been the

idle voices of strangers sounding in the distance, ever so far away. Argus nestled closer and closer at her knee, and she patted his big blunt head absently, with a dim sense of comfort in this brute love, which she had not derived from human sympathy.

Miss McCroke went on talking and arguing with Rorie, with a view to sustaining that fictitious cheerfulness which might beguile Vixen into brief oblivion of her griefs. But Vixen was not so to be beguiled. She was with them, but not of them. Her haggard eyes stared at the fire, and her thoughts were with the dear dead father, over whose newly-filled grave the evening shadows were closing.

CHAPTER X.

CAPTAIN WINSTANLEY.

Two years later, and Vixen was sitting with the same faithful Argus nestling beside her, by the fireside of a spacious Brighton drawing-room, a large, lofty, commonplace room, with tall windows facing seawards. Miss McCroke was there too, standing at one of the windows taking up a dropped stitch in her knitting, while Mrs. Tempest walked slowly up and down the expanse of Brussels carpet, stopping now and then at a window to look idly out at the red sunset beyond the low-lying roofs and spars of Shoreham. Those two years had changed Violet Tempest from a slender girl to a nobly-formed woman; a woman whom a sculptor would have worshipped as his dream of perfection, whom a painter would have reverenced for her glow and splendour of colouring; but about whose beauty the common run of mankind, and more especially

womankind, had not quite made up their minds. The pretty little women with eighteen-inch waists opined that Miss Tempest was too big.

"She's very handsome, you know, and all that," they said deprecatingly, "and her figure is quite splendid; but she's on such a very large scale. She ought to be painted in fresco, you know, on a high cornice. As Autumn, or Plenty, or Ceres, or something of that kind, carrying a cornucopia. But in a drawing-room she looks so very massive."

The amber-haired women—palpably indebted to auricomous fluids for the colour of their tresses—objected to the dark burnished gold of Violet Tempest's hair. There was too much red in the gold, they said, and a colour so obviously natural was very unfashionable. That cream-white skin of hers, too, found objectors, on the score of a slight powdering of freckles; spots which the kindly sun leaves on the fruit he best loves. In fact, there were many reservations made by Miss Tempest's pretended admirers when they summed up her good looks; but when she rode her

pretty bay horse along the King's Road, strangers turned to look at her admiringly; when she entered a crowded room she threw all paler beauties in the shade. The cabbage-rose is a vulgar flower perhaps, but she is queen of the garden notwithstanding.

Lest it should be supposed, after this, that Vixen was a giantess, it may be as well to state that her height was five feet six, her waist twenty-two inches at most, her shoulders broad but finely sloping, her arms full and somewhat muscular, her hands not small, but exquisitely tapering, her foot long and narrow, her instep arched like an Arab's, and all her movements instinct with an untutored grace and dignity. She held her head higher than is common to women, and on that score was found guilty of pride.

"I think we ought to go back before Christmas, Violet," said Mrs. Tempest, continuing a discussion that had been dragging itself slowly along for the last half-hour.

"I am ready, mamma," answered Vixen submissively. "It will break our hearts afresh when

we go home, but I suppose we must go home some day."

"But you would like to see the dear old house again, surely, Violet?"

"Like to see the frame without the picture? No, no, no, mamma. The frame was very dear while the picture was in it—but—yes," cried Vixen passionately, "I should like to go back. I should like to see papa's grave, and carry fresh flowers there every day. It has been too much neglected."

"Neglected, Violet! How can you say such a thing? When Manotti's bill for the monument was over six hundred pounds."

"Oh mamma, there is more love in a bunch of primroses that my own hand gathers and carries to the grave than in all the marble or granite in Westminster Abbey."

"My dear, for poor people wild flowers are very nice, and show good feeling—but the rich must have monuments. There could be nothing too splendid for your dear papa," added the widow tearfully.

She was always tearful when she spoke of her

dear Edward, even now; though she was beginning to find that life had some savour without him.

"No," said Vixen, "but I think papa will like the flowers best."

"Then if all is well, Miss McCroke," pursued Mrs. Tempest, "we will go back at the end of November. It would be a pity to lose the season here."

Vixen yawned despondently.

"What do we care about the season, mamma?" she exclaimed. "Can it matter to us whether there are two or three thousand extra people in the place? It only makes the King's Road a little more uncomfortable."

"My dear Violet, at your age gaiety is good for you," said Mrs. Tempest.

"Yes, and, like most other things that are good, it's very disagreeable," retorted Vixen.

"And now, about this ball," pursued Mrs. Tempest, taking up a dropped stitch in the previous argument; "I really think we ought to go, if it were only on Violet's account. Don't you, Maria?"

Mrs. Tempest always called her governess Maria when she was anxious to conciliate her.

"Violet is old enough to enter society, certainly," said Miss McCroke, with some deliberation; "but whether a public ball——"

"If it's on my account, mamma, pray don't think of going," protested Vixen earnestly; "I hate the idea of a ball—I hate——"

"Captain Winstanley," announced Forbes, in the dusky end of the drawing-room by the door.

"He has saved me the trouble of finishing my sentence," muttered Vixen.

The visitor came smiling through the dusk into the friendly glow of the fire. He shook hands with Mrs. Tempest with the air of an old friend, went over to the window to shake hands with Miss McCroke, and then came back to Vixen, who gave him a limp cold hand, with an indifference that was almost insolent, while Argus lifted his head an inch or so from the carpet and saluted him with a suppressed growl. Whether this arose from a wise instinct in the animal, or from a know-

ledge that his mistress disliked the gentleman, would be too nice a point to decide.

"I was that moment thinking of you, Captain Winstanley," said the widow.

"An honour and a happiness for me," murmured the Captain.

Mrs. Tempest seated herself in her own particular chair, beside which was her own particular table with one of those pretty tea-services which were her chief delight—a miniature silver tea-kettle with a spirit-lamp, a cosy little ball-shaped teapot, cups and saucers of old Battersea.

"You'll take a cup of tea?" she said insinuatingly.

"I shall be delighted. I feel as if I ought to go home and write verses or smart paragraphs for the society papers after drinking your tea, it is so inspiring. Addison ought to have drunk just such tea before writing one of his *Spectators*, but unfortunately his muse required old port."

"If the *Spectator* came out nowadays I'm afraid we should think it stupid," suggested Mrs. Tempest.

"Simply because the slipshod writers of the present day have spoiled our taste for fine English," interjected Miss McCroke severely.

"Well, I fear we should find Addison a little thin," said Captain Winstanley; "I can't imagine London society existing for a week on such literary pabulum as 'The Vision of Mirza.' We want something stronger than that. A little scandal about our neighbours, a racy article on field sports, some sharpish hits at the City, a libel or two upon men we know, a social article sailing very near the wind, and one of Addison's papers on cherry-coloured hoods, or breast-knots, patches or powder, thrown in by way of padding. Our dear Joseph is too purely literary for the present age."

"What monsters newspapers have grown," remarked Mrs. Tempest. "It's almost impossible to get through them."

"Not if you read anything else," answered the Captain. "The majority do not."

"We were talking about the ball just as you came in," said Mrs. Tempest. "I really think Violet ought to go."

"I am sure she ought," said the Captain.

Vixen sat looking at the fire and patting Argus. She did not favour the Captain with so much as a glance; and yet he was a man upon whom the eyes of women were apt to dwell favourably. He was not essentially handsome. The most attractive men rarely are. He was tall and thin, with a waist as small as a woman's, small hands, small feet—a general delicacy of mould that was accounted thoroughbred. He had a long nose, a darkly-pale complexion, keen gray eyes under dark brows, dark hair, cropped close to his small head; thin lips, white teeth, a neat black moustache, and a strictly military appearance, though he had sold out of a line regiment three years ago, and was now a gentleman at large, doing nothing, and living in a gentleman-like manner on a very small income. He was not in debt, and was altogether respectable. Nothing could be said against him, unless it were some dark hint of a gambling transaction at a fast and furious club, some vague whisper about the mysterious appearance of a king at écarté—the kind of rumour which is apt to pursue a man who,

like Bulwer's Dudley Smooth, does not cheat but always wins.

Despite those vague slanders, which are generally baseless—the mere expression of society's floating malice, the scum of ill-nature on the ocean of talk—Captain Winstanley was a universal favourite. He went everywhere, and was liked wherever he went. He was gifted with that adaptability and handiness which is, of all cleverness, most valuable in polite society. Of him, as of Goldsmith, it might be said that he touched nothing he did not adorn. True, that the things he touched were for the most part small things; but they were things that kept him before the eye of society, and found favour in that eye.

He was a good horseman, a good oarsman, a good swimmer, a good cricketer. He played and sang; he was a first-rate amateur actor; he was great at billiards and all games of skill; he could talk any language society wanted him to talk—society not requiring a man to excel in Coptic or Chinese, or calling upon him suddenly for Japanese or Persian; he dressed with perfect taste, and

without the slightest pretence of dandyism; he could write a first-rate letter, and caricature his dearest friends of last year in pen and ink for the entertainment of his dearest friends of this year; he was known to have contributed occasionally to fashionable periodicals, and was supposed to have a reserve of wit and satire which would quite have annihilated the hack writers of the day had he cared to devote himself to literature.

Mrs. Tempest and her daughter had met the Captain early in the previous spring among Swiss mountains. He knew some of Mrs. Tempest's Hampshire friends, and with no other credentials had contrived to win her friendship. Vixen took it into her obstinate young head to detest him. But then, Vixen, at seventeen and a half, was full of ridiculous dislikes and irrational caprices. Mrs. Tempest, in her lonely and somewhat depressed condition, considered the Captain a particularly useful acquaintance. Miss McCroke was dubious, but finding any expression of her doubts ungraciously received, took the safer line of silence.

The ball in question was a charity ball at the

Pavilion, a perfectly unobjectionable ball. The list of patronesses bristled with noble names. There was nothing to be said against Vixen's appearance there, except Miss McCroke's objection, that Squire Tempest's daughter and heiress ought not to make her *début* in society at any public ball whatever; ought, in a manner, hardly to be seen by the human eye as a grown-up young lady, until she had been presented to her gracious sovereign. But Mrs. Tempest had set her heart upon Vixen's going to the ball; or, in other words, she had set her heart upon going herself. On her way through Paris, in September, she had gone to Worth's—out of curiosity, just to see what the great man's salons were like—and there she had been tempted into the purchase of an artistic arrangement in black silk and jet, velvet and passementerie. She did not require the costume, but the thing in itself was so beautiful that she could not help buying it. And having spent a hundred guineas upon this masterpiece, there arose in her mind a natural craving to exhibit it; to feel that she was being pointed out as one

of the best-dressed women in the crowded room; to know that women were whispering to each other significantly, "Worth," as the nocturne in velvet and silk and glimmering jet swept by them.

There was a good deal more discussion, and it was ultimately settled that Vixen should go to the ball. She had no positive objection. She would have liked the idea of the ball well enough perhaps, if it had not been for Captain Winstanley. It was his advocacy that made the subject odious.

"How very rudely you behaved to Captain Winstanley, Violet," said Mrs. Tempest, when her visitor had departed.

"Did I, mamma?" inquired Vixen listlessly. "I thought I was extraordinarily civil. If you knew how I should have liked to behave to him, you would think so too."

"I cannot imagine why you are so prejudiced against him," pursued Mrs. Tempest fretfully.

"It is not prejudice, mamma, but instinct, like Argus's. That man is destined to do us some great wrong, if we do not escape out of his clutches."

"It is shameful of you to say such things," cried the widow, pale with anger. "What have you to say against him? What fault can you find with him? You cannot deny that he is most gentlemanlike."

"No, mamma; he is a little too gentlemanlike. He makes a trade of his gentlemanliness. He is too highly polished for me."

"You prefer a rough young fellow, like Roderick Vawdrey, who talks slang, and smells of the stables."

"I prefer anyone who is good and true," retorted Vixen. "Roderick is a man, and not to be named in the same breath with your fine gentleman."

"I admit that the comparison would be vastly to his disadvantage," said the widow. "But it's time to dress for dinner."

"And we are to dine with the Mortimers," yawned Vixen. "What a bore!"

This young lady had not that natural bent for society which is symptomatic of her age. The wound that pierced her young heart two years

ago had not healed so completely that she could find pleasure in inane conversation across a primeval forest of sixpenny ferns, and all the factitious liveliness of a fashionable dinner-table.

CHAPTER XI.

"IT SHALL BE MEASURE FOR MEASURE."

THE night of the ball came, and, in spite of her aversion for Captain Winstanley and general dislike of the whole thing, Violet Tempest began the evening by enjoying herself. She was young and energetic, and had an immense reserve of animal spirits after her two years of sadness and mourning. She danced with the partners her friends brought her—some of the most eligible men in the room—and was full of life and gaiety; yet the festival seemed to her in somewise horrible all the time.

"If papa could know that we are dancing and smiling at each other, as if all life was made up of gladness, when he is lying in his cold grave!" thought Vixen, after joining hands with her mother in the ladies' chain.

The widow looked as if she had never known a care. She was conscious that Worth's *chef-d'œuvre* was not thrown away. She saw herself in the great mirrors which once reflected George and his lovely Fitzherbert in their days of gladness—which reflected the same George later, old, and sick, and weary.

"That French *grande dame* was right," thought Mrs. Tempest, "who said, '*Le noir est si flattant pour les blondes.*'"

Black was flattering for Vixen's auburn hair also. Though her indifferent eye rarely glanced at the mirrored walls, she had never looked lovelier. A tall graceful figure, in billowy black tulle, wreathed with white chrysanthemums; a queen-like head, with a red-gold coronal; a throat like an ivory pillar, spanned with a broad black ribbon, fastened with a diamond clasp; diamond stars in her ears, and a narrow belt of diamonds round each white arm.

"How many waltzes have you kept for me?" Captain Winstanley asked presently, coming up to Vixen.

"I have not kept waltzes for anyone," she answered indifferently.

"But surely you were under a promise to keep some for me? I asked you a week ago."

"Did you? I am sure I never promised anything of the kind."

"Here is only one little shabby waltz left," said the Captain, looking at her programme. "May I put my name down for that?"

"If you like," answered Vixen indifferently; and then, with the faintest suspicion of malice, she added, "as mamma does not dance round dances."

She was standing up for the Lancers presently, and her partner had just led her to her place, when she saw that she had her mother and Captain Winstanley again for her *vis-à-vis*. She grew suddenly pale, and turned away.

"Will you let me sit this out?" she said. "I feel awfully ill."

Her partner was full of concern, and carried her off at once to a cooler room.

"It is too bad!" she muttered to herself. "The Lancers! To go romping round with a lot of wild

young men and women. It is as bad as the Queen in Hamlet."

This was the last dance before supper. Vixen went in to the supper-room presently with her attentive partner, who had kept by her side devotedly while the lively scramble to the good old English tunes was going on in the dancing-room.

"Are you better?" he asked tenderly, fanning her with her big black fan, painted with violets and white chrysanthemums. "The room is abominably hot."

"Thanks. I'm quite well now. It was only a momentary faintness. But I rather hate the Lancers, don't you?"

"Well, I don't know. I think, sometimes, you know, with a nice partner, they're good fun. Only one can't help treading on the ladies' trains, and they wind themselves round one's legs like snakes. I've seen fellows come awful croppers, and the lady who has done it look so sweetly unconcerned. But if one tears a lace flounce, you know, they look daggers. It's something too dreadful to feel one-

self walking into honiton at ten guineas a yard, and the more one tries to extricate oneself the more harm one does."

Vixen's supper was the merest pretence. Her mother sat opposite her, with Captain Winstanley still in attendance. Vixen gave them one scathing look, and then sat like an image of scorn. Her partner could not get a word from her, and when he offered her the fringed end of a cracker bonbon, she positively refused to have anything to do with it.

"Please don't," she said. "It's too inane. I couldn't positively pretend to be interested in the motto."

When she went back to the ball-room Captain Winstanley followed her and claimed his waltz. The band was just striking up the latest love-sick German melody, "*Weit von dir!*" a strain of drawling tenderness.

"You had better go and secure your supper," said Vixen coldly.

"I despise all ball-suppers. This one most particularly, if it were to deprive me of my waltz."

Vixen shrugged her shoulders, and submitted to take those few preliminary steps which are like the strong swimmer's shiverings on the bank ere he plunges in the stream. And then she was whirling round to the legato strains, "*Weit von dir! Weit von dir! Wo ist mein Leben's Lust?—Weit von dir—weit von dir!*"

Captain Winstanley's waltzing was simple perfection. It was not the Liverpool Lurch, or the Scarborough Scramble, the Bermondsey Bounce, or the Whitechapel Wiggle; it was waltzing pure and simple, unaffected, graceful; the waltzing of a man with a musical ear, and an athlete's mastery of the art of motion. Vixen hated the Captain, but she enjoyed the waltz. They danced till the last bar died away in a tender diminuendo.

"You look pale," said the Captain, "let us go into the garden." He brought her cloak and wrapped it round her, and she took his offered arm without a word. It was one of those rare nights in late October, when the wind is not cold. There was hardly the flutter of a leaf in the Pavilion garden. The neighbouring sea made the gentlest

music—a melancholy ebb and flow of sound, like the murmuring of some great imprisoned spirit.

In the searching light of day, when its adjacent cab-stands and commonnesses are visible, and its gravelled walks are peopled with nursemaids and small children, the Pavilion garden can hardly be called romantic. But by this tender moonlight, in this cool stillness of a placid autumn midnight, even the Pavilion garden had its air of romance and mystery. And, after all, this part of Brighton has a peculiar charm which all the rest of Brighton lacks. It speaks of the past, it tells its story of the dead. They were not great or heroic, perhaps, those departed figures, whose ghosts haunt us in the red and yellow rooms, and in the stiff town garden; but they had their histories. They lived, and loved, and suffered; and, being dead so long, come back to us in the softened light of vanished days, and take hold of our fancy with their quaint garments and antique head-gear, their powder, and court-swords, and diamond shoe-buckles, and little loves and little sorrows.

Vixen walked slowly along the shining gravel-

path, with her black and gold mantle folded round her, looking altogether statuesque and unapproachable. They took one turn in absolute silence, and then Captain Winstanley, who was not inclined to beat about the bush when he had something particular to say, and a good opportunity for saying it, broke the spell.

This was perhaps the first time, in an acquaintance of more than six months, that he had ever found himself alone with Violet Tempest, without hazard of immediate interruption.

"Miss Tempest," he began, with a firmness of tone that startled her, "I want to know why you are so unkind to me?"

"I hardly know what you mean by unkindness. I hope I have never said anything uncivil?"

"No; but you have let me see very plainly that you dislike me."

"I am sorry nature has given me an unpleasantly candid disposition."

Those keen gray eyes of the Captain's were watching her intently. An angry look shot at her

from under the straight dark brows—swift as an arrow.

"You admit then that you do not like me?" he said.

Vixen paused before replying. The position was embarrassing.

"I suppose if I were ladylike and proper, I should protest that I like you immensely; that there is no one in the world, my mother excepted, whom I like better. But I never was particularly proper or polite, Captain Winstanley, and I must confess there are very few people I do like, and——"

"And I am not one of them," said the Captain.

"You have finished my sentence for me."

"That is hard upon me—no, Violet, you can never know how hard. Why should you dislike me? You are the first woman who ever told me so" (flushing with an indignant recollection of all his victories). "I have done nothing to offend you. I have not been obtrusive. I have worshipped at a distance—but the Persian's homage of the sun is not more reverent——"

"Oh, pray don't talk about Persians and the sun," cried Violet. "I am not worthy that you should be so concerned about my likes and dislikes. Please think of me as an untaught inexperienced girl. Two years ago I was a spoiled child. You don't know how my dearest father spoiled me. It is no wonder I am rude. Remember this, and forgive me if I am too truthful."

"You are all that is lovely," he exclaimed passionately, stung by her scorn and fired by her beauty, almost beside himself as they stood there in the magical moonlight—for once in his life forgetting to calculate every move on life's chessboard. "You are too lovely for me. From the very first, in Switzerland, when I was so happy——no, I will not tell you. I will not lay down my heart to be trampled under your feet."

"Don't," cried Vixen, transfixing him with the angry fire of her eyes, "for I'm afraid I should trample on it. I am not one of those gentle creatures who go out of their way to avoid treading on worms—or other reptiles."

"You are as cruel as you are lovely," he said,

"and your cruelty is sweeter than another woman's kindness. Violet, I laugh at your dislike. Yes, such aversion as that is often the beginning of closest liking. I will not be disheartened. I will not be put off by your scornful candour. What if I were to tell you that you are the only woman I ever loved?"

"Pray do not. It would transform passive dislike into active hatred. I should be sorry for that, because," looking at him deliberately, with a slow scorn, "I think my mother likes you."

"She has honoured me with her confidence, and I hope I shall not prove unworthy of the trust. I rarely fail to repay any benefit that is bestowed upon me."

"October nights are treacherous," said Vixen, drawing her cloak closer round her. "I think we had better go back to the ball-room."

She was shivering a little with agitated feeling, in spite of that mantle of scorn in which she had wrapped herself. This was the first man who had ever called her lovely, who had ever talked to her of love with manhood's strong passion.

The Captain gave her his arm, and they went back to the glare and heat of the yellow dragons and scarlet griffins. Another Lancer scramble was in full progress, to the old-fashioned jigging tunes, but Mrs. Tempest was sitting among the matrons in a corner by an open window.

"Are we ever going home any more, mamma?" inquired Vixen.

"My dear Violet, I have been waiting for you ever so long."

"Why should you leave so early?" exclaimed Captain Winstanley. "There are half-a-dozen more dances, and you are engaged for them all, I believe, Miss Tempest."

"Then I will show mercy to my partners by going away," said Violet. "Are all balls as long as this? We seem to have been here ages; I expect to find my hair gray to-morrow morning."

"I really think we had better go," said Mrs. Tempest, in her undecided way.

She was a person who never quite made up her mind about anything, but balanced every question

gently, letting somebody else turn the scale for her —her maid, her governess, her daughter; she was always trying to have her own way, but never quite knew what her own way was, and just managed things skilfully enough to prevent other people having theirs.

"If you are determined, I will see you to your carriage, and then the ball is over for me," said the Captain gallantly.

He offered Mrs. Tempest his arm, and they went out into the vestibule, where the Captain left them for a few minutes, while he went into the porch to hasten the arrival of the carriage.

"Where were you and Captain Winstanley all that time, Violet?" asked Mrs. Tempest.

"In the garden."

"How imprudent!"

"Indeed, dear mamma, it wasn't cold."

"But you were out there so long. What could you find to talk about all that time?"

"We were not talking all the time, only enjoying the cool air and the moonlight."

"Mrs. Tempest's carriage!" roared one of the

door-keepers, as if it had been his doing that the carriage had appeared so quickly.

Captain Winstanley was ready to hand them to their brougham.

"Come and take a cup of tea to-morrow afternoon, and let us talk over the ball," said the widow.

"With infinite pleasure."

"Shall we drop you at your house?"

"A thousand thanks—no—my rooms are so close, I'll walk home."

He went back for his overcoat, and then walked slowly away, without another glance at the crowded ball-room, or the corridors where the ladies who were waiting for their carriages were contriving to improve the time by a good deal of quiet, or even noisy, flirtation. His lodgings were on the Old Steine, close by. But he did not go home immediately. There are times in a man's life when four walls are too small to hold the bigness of his thoughts. Captain Winstanley paced the Marine Parade for half an hour or so before he went home.

"*Va pour la mère,*" he said to himself, at the close of that half-hour's meditations; "she is really very nice, and the position altogether advantageous, perhaps as much as one has the right to expect in the general decadence of things. But, good heavens, how lovely that girl is! She is the first woman who ever looked me in the face and told me she disliked me; the first woman who ever gave me contemptuous looks and scornful words. And yet —for that very reason perhaps—I——"

The dark brows contracted over the keen eyes, which seemed closer than usual to the hawk nose.

"Look to yourself, my queen, in the time to come," he said, as he turned his back on the silvery sea and moonlight sky. "You have been hard to me and I will be hard to you. It shall be measure for measure."

CHAPTER XII.

"I HAVE NO WRONG, WHERE I CAN CLAIM NO RIGHT."

GOING home again. That was hard to bear. It reopened all the old wounds. Violet Tempest felt as if her heart must really break, as if this new grief were sharper than the old one, when the carriage drove in through the familiar gates, in the December dusk, and along the winding shrub-beried drive, and up to the Tudor porch, where the lion of the Tempests stood, *passant regardant*, with lifted paw and backward gaze, above the stone shield. The ruddy firelight was shining across the wide doorway. The old hearth looked as cheerful as of old. And there stood the empty chair beside it. That had been Vixen's particular wish.

"Let nothing be disturbed, dear mamma," she had said ever so many times, when her mother was writing her orders to the housekeeper. "Beg

them to keep everything just as it was in papa's time."

"My dear, it will only make you grieve more."

"Yes; but I had rather grieve for him than forget him. I am more afraid of forgetting him than of grieving too much for him," said Vixen.

And now, as she stood on the hearth after her journey, wrapped in black furs, a little black fur *toque* crowning her ruddy gold hair, fancy filled the empty chair as she gazed at it. Yes, she could see her father sitting there in his hunting-clothes, his whip across his knee.

The old pointer, the Squire's favourite, came whining to her feet. How old he looked! Old, and broken, and infirm, as if from much sorrow.

"Poor Nip! poor Nip!" she said, patting him. "The joy of your life went with papa, didn't it?"

"It's all very sad," murmured Mrs. Tempest, loosening her wraps. "A sad, sad home-coming. And it seems only yesterday that I came here as a bride. Did I ever tell you about my travelling-dress, Violet? It was a shot-silk—they were

fashionable then, you know—bronze and blue—the loveliest combination of colour!"

"I can't imagine a shot-silk being anything but detestable," said Vixen curtly. "Poor Nip! How faithful dogs are! The dear thing is actually crying!"

Tears were indeed running from the poor old eyes, as the pointer's head lay in Vixen's lap; as if memory, kindled by her image, brought back the past too keenly for that honest canine heart.

"It is very mournful," said Mrs. Tempest. "Pauline, let us have a cup of tea."

She sank into an arm-chair opposite the fire. Not the Squire's old carved oak-chair, with its tawny leather cushions. That must needs be sacred evermore—a memento of the dead, standing beside the hearth, revered as the image of an honoured ancestor in a Roman citizen's home.

"I wonder if anyone is alive that we knew here?" said Vixen, lying back in her low chair, and idly caressing the dogs.

"My dear Violet, why should people be dead? We have only been away two years."

"No; but it seems so long. I hardly expect to see any of the old faces. He is not here," with a sudden choking sob. "Why should all be left—except him?"

"The workings of Providence are full of mystery," sighed the widow. "Dear Edward! How handsome he looked that day he brought me home. And he was a noble-looking man to the last. Not more than two spoonfuls of pekoe, Pauline. You ought to know how I like it by this time."

This to the handmaiden, who was making tea at the gipsy table in front of the fire—the table at which Vixen and Rorie had drunk tea so merrily on that young man's birthday.

After tea mother and daughter went the round of the house. How familiar, how dear, how strange, how sad all things looked! The faithful servants had done their duty. Everything was in its place. The last room they entered was the Squire's study. Here were all his favourite books. The "Sporting Magazine" from its commencement, in crimson morocco. "Nimrod" and the "Druid," Assheton

Smith's "Memoirs," and many others of the same class. Books on farming and farriery, on dogs and guns. Here were the Squire's guns and whips, a motley collection, all neatly arranged by his own hands. The servants had done nothing but keep them free from dust. There, by the low and cosy fireplace, with its tiled hearth, stood the capacious crimson morocco chair, in which the master of the Abbey House had been wont to sit when he held audience with his kennel-huntsman, or gamekeeper, his farm-bailiff, or stud-groom.

"Mamma, I should like you to lock the door of this room and keep the key, so that no one may ever come here," said Vixen.

"My dear, that is just the way to prolong your grief; but I will do it if you like."

"Do, dear mamma. Or, if you will let me keep the key, I will come in and dust the room every day. It would be a pleasure for me, a mournful one, perhaps, but still a pleasure."

Mrs. Tempest made no objection, and, when they left the room, Vixen locked the door and put the key in her pocket.

Christmas was close at hand. The saddest time for such a home-coming, Vixen thought. The gardeners brought in their barrows of holly, and fir, and laurel; but Vixen would take no part in the decoration of hall and corridors, staircase and gallery—she who in former years had been so active in the labour. The humble inhabitants of the village rejoiced in the return of the family at the great house, and Vixen was pleased to see the kind faces again, the old men and women, the rosy-cheeked children, and careworn mothers, withered and wrinkled before their time with manifold anxieties. She had a friendly word for every-one, and gifts for all. Home was sweet to her after her two years' absence, despite the cloud of sadness that overhung all things. She went out to the stables and made friends with the old horses, which had been out at grass all through the summer, and had enjoyed a paradise of rest for the last two years. Slug and Crawler, Mrs. Tempest's carriage horses, sleek even-minded bays, had been at Brighton, and so had Vixen's beautiful thoroughbred, and a handsome brown for the

groom; but all the rest had stayed in Hampshire. Not one had been sold, though the stud was a wasteful and useless one for a widow and her daughter. There was Bullfinch, the hunter Squire Tempest had ridden in his last hour of life. Violet went into his box, and caressed him, and fed him, and cried over him with bitterest tears. This home-coming brought back the old sorrow with overwhelming force. She ran out of the stables to hide her tears, and ran up to her own room, and abandoned herself to her grief, almost as utterly as she had done on those dark days when her father's corpse was lying in the house.

There was no friendly Miss McCroke now to be fussy and anxious, and to interpose herself between Violet Tempest and her grief. Violet was supposed to be "finished," or, in other words, to know everything under the sun which a young lady of good birth and ample fortune can be required to know. Everything, in this case, consisted of a smattering of French, Italian, and German, a dubious recollection of the main facts in modern history, hazy images of Sennacherib,

Helen of Troy, Semiramis, Cyrus, the Battle of Marathon, Romulus and Remus, the murder of Julius Cæsar, and the loves of Antony and Cleopatra flitting dimly athwart the cloudy background of an unmapped ancient world, a few vague notions about astronomy, some foggy ideas upon the constitution of plants and flowers, seaweeds and shells, rocks and hills—and a general indifference for all literature except poetry and novels.

Miss McCroke, having done her duty conscientiously after her lights, had now gone to finish three other young ladies, the motherless daughters of an Anglo-Indian colonel, over whom she was to exercise maternal authority and guidance, in a tall narrow house in Maida Vale. She had left Mrs. Tempest with all honours, and Violet had lavished gifts upon her at parting, feeling fonder of her governess in the last week of their association than at any other period of her tutelage. To-day, in her sorrow, it was a relief to Violet to find herself free from the futile consolations of friendship. She flung herself into

the arm-chair by the fire, and sobbed out her grief.

"Oh, kindest, dearest, best of fathers," she cried, "what is home without you!"

And then she remembered that awful day of the funeral when Roderick Vawdrey had sat with her beside this hearth, trying to comfort her, and remembered how she had heard his voice as a sound far away, a sound that had no meaning. That was the last time she had seen him.

"I don't suppose I thanked him for his pity or his kindness," she thought. "He must have gone away thinking me cold and ungrateful; but I was like a creature at the bottom of some dark dismal pit. How could I feel thankful to someone looking down at me and talking to me from the free happy world at the top?"

Her sobs ceased gradually, she dried her tears, and that unconscious pleasure in life which is a part of innocent youth came slowly back. She looked round the room in which so much of her childhood had been spent, a room full of her own fancies and caprices, a room whose prettiness had been

bought with her own money, and was for the most part the work of her own hands.

In spite of home's sorrowful association she was glad to find herself at home. Mountains, and lakes, and sunny bays, and dark pathless forests, may be ever so good to see, but there is something sweet in our return to the familiar rooms of home; some pleasure in being shut snugly within four walls, surrounded by one's own belongings.

The wood-fire burnt merrily, and sparkled on the many-coloured pots and pans upon the panelled wall; here an Etruscan vase of Indian red, there a Moorish water-jar of vivid amber. Outside the deep mullioned windows the winter blast was blowing, with occasional spurts of flying snow. Argus crept in presently, and stretched himself at full length upon the fleecy rug. Vixen lay back in her low chair, musing idly in the glow of the fire, and by-and-by the lips which had been convulsed with grief parted in a smile, the lovely brown eyes shone with happy memories.

She was thinking of her old playfellow and friend, Rorie.

"I wonder if he will come to-day?" she mused. "I think he will. He is sure to be at home for the hunting. Yes, he will come to-day. What will he be like, I wonder? Handsomer than he was two years ago? No, that could hardly be. He is quite a man now. Three-and-twenty! I must not laugh at him any more."

The thought of his coming thrilled her with a new joy. She seemed to have been living an artificial life in the two years of her absence, to have been changed in her very self by change of surroundings. It was almost as if the old Vixen had been sent into an enchanted sleep, while some other young lady, a model of propriety and good manners, went about the world in Vixen's shape. Her life had been made up, more or less, of trifles and foolishness, with a background of grand scenery. Tepid little friendships with agreeable fellow-travellers at Nice; tepid little friendships of the same order in Switzerland; well-dressed young people smiling at each other, and delighting in each other's company; and parting, probably for ever, without a pang.

But now she had come back to the friends, the horses, the dogs, the rooms, the gardens, the fields, the forests of youth, and was going to be the real Vixen again; the wild, thoughtless, high-spirited girl whom Squire Tempest and all the peasantry round about had loved.

"I have been ridiculously well-behaved," she said to herself, "quite a second edition of mamma. But now I am back in the Forest my good manners may go hang. 'My foot's on my native heath, and my name is McGregor.'"

Somehow in all her thoughts of home—after that burst of grief for her dead father—Roderick Vawdrey was the central figure. He filled the gap cruel death had made.

Would Rorie come soon to see her? Would he be very glad to have her at home again? What would he think of her? Would he fancy her changed? For the worse? For the better?

"I wonder whether he would like my good manners, or the original Vixen best?" she speculated.

The morning wore on, and still Violet Tempest

sat idly by the fire. She had made up her mind that Roderick would come to see her at once. She was sufficiently aware of her own importance to feel sure that the fact of her return had been duly chronicled in the local papers. He would come to-day—before luncheon, perhaps, and they three, mamma, Rorie, and herself, would sit at the round table in the library—the snug warm room where they had so often sat with papa. This thought brought back the bitterness of her loss.

"I can bear it better if Rorie is with us," she thought, "and he is almost sure to come. He would not be so unkind as to delay bidding welcome to such poor lonely creatures as mamma and I."

She looked at her little watch—a miniature hunter in a case of black enamel, with a monogram in diamonds, one of her father's last gifts. It was one o'clock already, and luncheon would be at half-past.

"Only half an hour for Rorie," she thought.

The minute-hand crept slowly to the half-hour,

the luncheon-gong sounded below, and there had been no announcement of Mr. Vawdrey.

"He may be downstairs with mamma all this time," thought Vixen. "Forbes would not tell me, unless he were sent."

She went downstairs and met Forbes in the hall.

"Oh, if you please, ma'am, Mrs. Tempest does not feel equal to coming down to luncheon. She will take a wing of chicken in her own room."

"And I don't feel equal to sitting in the library alone, Forbes," said Violet; "so you may tell Phœbe to bring me a cup of tea and a biscuit. Has nobody called this morning?"

"No, ma'am."

Vixen went back to her room, out of spirits and out of temper. It was unkind of Rorie, cold, neglectful, heartless.

"If he had come home after an absence of two years—absence under such sad circumstances—how anxious I should be to see him," she thought. "But I don't suppose there is frost

enough to stop the hunting, and I daresay he is tearing across the heather on some big raw-boned horse, and not giving me a thought. Or perhaps he is dancing attendance upon Lady Mabel. But no, I don't think he cares much for that kind of thing."

She moved about the room a little, rearranging things that were already arranged exactly as she had left them two years ago. She opened a book and flung it aside; tried the piano, which sounded muffled and woolly.

"My poor little Broadwood is no better for being out at grass," she said.

She went to one of the windows, and stood there looking out, expecting every instant to see a dog-cart with a rakish horse, a wasp-like body, and high red wheels, spin round the curve of the shrubbery. She stood thus for a long time, as she had done on that wet October afternoon of Rorie's home-coming; but no rakish horse came swinging round the curve of the carriage-drive. The flying snow drifted past the window, the winter sky looked blue and clear between the brief showers,

the tall feathery fir-trees and straight slim cypresses stood up against the afternoon light, and Vixen gazed at them with angry eyes, full of resentment against Roderick Vawdrey.

"The ground is too hard for the scent to lie well, that's one comfort," she reflected savagely.

And then she thought of the dear old kennels given over to a new master; the hounds whose names and idiosyncrasies she had known as well as if they had been human acquaintance. She had lost all interest in them now. Ponto and Gellert, Lightfoot, Juno, Ringlet, Lord Dundreary—they had forgotten her, no doubt.

Here was someone at last, but not the one for whom she was watching. A figure clothed in a long loose black coat and slouched felt hat, and carrying a weedy umbrella, trudged sturdily round the curve, and came briskly towards the porch. It was Mr. Scobel, the incumbent of the pretty little Gothic church in the village—a church like a toy.

He was a good man and a benevolent, this

Mr. Scobel; a hard-worker, and a blessing in the neighbourhood. But just at this moment Violet Tempest did not feel grateful to him for coming.

"What does he want?" she thought. "Blankets and coals and things, I suppose."

She turned sullenly from the window, and went back to her seat beside the fire, and threw on a log, and gave herself up to disappointment. The blue winter sky had changed to gray; the light was fading behind the feathery fir-tops.

"Perhaps he will come to afternoon tea," she thought; and then, with a discontented shrug of her shoulders: "No, he is not coming at all. If he cared about us he would have been the first to bid us welcome; knowing, as he must, how miserable it was for me to come home at all—without papa!"

She sat looking at the fire.

"How idle I am!" she mused; "and poor Crokey did so implore me to go on with my education, and read good useful books and enlarge

my mind. I don't think my poor little mind would bear any more stretching, or that I should be much happier if I knew all about Central Africa, and the nearest way from Hindostan to China, or old red sandstone, and tertiary, and the rest of them. What does it matter to me what the earth is made of, if I can but be happy upon it? No, I shall never try to be a highly cultivated young woman. I shall read Byron, and Tennyson, and Wordsworth, and Keats, and Bulwer, and Dickens, and Thackeray, and remain an ignoramus all the days of my life. I think that would be quite enough for Rorie, if he and I were to be much together; for I don't believe he ever opens a book at all. And what would be the use of my talking to him about old red sandstone or the centre of Africa?"

Phœbe, Miss Tempest's fresh-faced Hampshire maid, appeared at this moment.

"Oh, if you please, miss, your ma says would you go to the drawing-room? Mr. Scobel is with her, and would like to see you."

Violet rose with a sigh.

"Is my hair awfully untidy, Phœbe?"

"I think I had better arrange the plaits, miss."

"That means that I'm an object. It's four o'clock; I may as well change my dress for dinner. I suppose I must go down to dinner?"

"Lor' yes, miss; it will never do to shut yourself up in your own room and fret. You're as pale as them there Christmas roses already."

Ten minutes later Vixen went down to the drawing-room, looking very stately in her black Irish poplin, whose heavy folds became the tall full figure, and whose dense blackness set off the ivory skin and warm auburn hair. She had given just one passing glance at herself in the cheval-glass, and Vanity had whispered:

"Perhaps Rorie would have thought me improved; but he has not taken the trouble to come and see. I might be honeycombed by the small-pox or bald from the effects of typhus, for aught he cares."

The drawing-room was all aglow with blazing logs, and the sky outside the windows looking pale and gray, when Violet went in. Mrs. Tempest was

in her favourite arm-chair by the fire, Tennyson's latest poem on the velvet-covered gipsy table at her side, in company with a large black fan and a smelling-bottle. Mr. Scobel was sitting in a low chair on the other side of the hearth, with his knees almost up to his chin and his trousers wrinkled up ever so far above his stout Oxford shoes, leaving a considerable interval of gray stocking. He was a man of about thirty, pale, and unpretending of aspect, who fortified his native modesty with a pair of large binoculars, which interposed a kind of barrier between himself and the outer world.

He rose as Violet came towards him, and turned the binoculars upon her, glittering in the glow of the fire.

"How tall you have grown," he cried, when they had shaken hands. "And how——" here he stopped, with a little nervous laugh; "I really don't think I should have known you if we had met elsewhere."

"Perhaps Rorie would hardly know me," thought Vixen.

"How are all the poor people?" she asked, when Mr. Scobel had resumed his seat, and was placidly caressing his knees, and blinking, or seeming to blink, at the fire with his binoculars.

"Oh, poor souls!" he sighed. "There has been a great deal of sickness and distress, and want of work. Yes, a very great deal. The winter began early, and we have had some severe weather. James Parsons is in prison again for rabbit-snaring. I'm really afraid James is incorrigible. Mrs. Roper's eldest son, Tom—I daresay you remember Tom, an idle little ruffian, who was always birdnesting—has managed to get himself run over by a pair of Lord Ellangowan's waggon-horses, and now Lady Ellangowan is keeping the whole family. An aunt came from Salisbury to sit up with the boy, and was quite angry because Lady Ellangowan did not pay her for nursing him."

"That's the worst of the poor," said Mrs. Tempest languidly, the firelight playing upon her diamond rings, as she took her fan from the velvet table and slowly unfolded it, to protect her cheek from the glare, "they are never satisfied."

"Isn't it odd they are not," cried Vixen, coming suddenly out of a deep reverie, "when they have everything that can make life delightful?"

"I don't know about everything, Violet; but really, when they have such nice cottages as your papa built for them, so well-drained and ventilated, they ought to be more contented."

"What a comfort good drainage and ventilation must be, when there is no bread in the larder!" said Violet.

"My dear, it is ridiculous to talk in that way; just in the style of horrid Radical newspapers. I am sure the poor have an immense deal done for them. Look at Mr. Scobel, is he not always trying to help them?"

"I do what I can," said the clergyman modestly; "but I only wish it were more. An income of sixteen shillings a week for a family of seven requires a good deal of ekeing out. If it were not for the assistance I get here, and in one or two other directions, things would be very bad in Beechdale."

Beechdale was the name of the village nearest

the Abbey House, the village to which belonged Mr. Scobel's toy-church.

"Of course, we must have the usual distribution of blankets and wearing apparel on Christmas Eve," said Mrs. Tempest. "It will seem very sad without my dear husband. But we came home before Christmas on purpose."

"How good of you! It was very sad last year when the poor people came up to the Hall to receive your gifts, and there were no familiar faces, except the servants'. There were a good many tears shed over last year's blankets, I assure you."

"Poor dear things!" sighed Mrs. Tempest, not making it too clear whether she meant the blankets, or the recipients thereof.

Violet said nothing after her little ironical protest about the poor. She sat opposite the fire, between her mother and Mr. Scobel, but at some distance from both. The ruddy light glowed on her ruddy hair, and lit up her pale cheeks, and shone in her brilliant eyes. The incumbent of Beechdale thought he had never seen anything so lovely. She was like a painted window; a Madonna, with the

glowing colour of Rubens, the divine grace of Raffaelle. And those little speeches about the poor had warmed his heart. He was Violet's friend and champion from that moment.

Mrs. Tempest fanned herself listlessly.

"I wish Forbes would bring the tea," she said.

"Shall I ring, mamma?"

"No, dear. They have not finished tea in the housekeeper's room, perhaps. Forbes doesn't like to be disturbed. Is there any news, Mr. Scobel? We only came home yesterday evening, and have seen no one."

"News! Well, no, I think not much. Lady Ellangowan has got a new orchid."

"And there has been a new baby too, hasn't there?"

"Oh yes. But nobody talks about the baby, and everybody is in raptures with the orchid."

"What is it like?"

"Rather a fine boy. I christened him last week."

"I mean the orchid."

"Oh, something really magnificent; a brilliant

blue, a butterfly-shaped blossom that positively looks as if it were alive. They say Lord Ellangowan gave five hundred guineas for it. People come from the other side of the county to see it."

"I think you are all orchid mad," exclaimed Mrs. Tempest. "Oh, here comes the tea!" as Forbes entered with the old silver tray and Swansea cups and saucers. "You'll take some, of course, Mr. Scobel. I cannot understand this rage for orchids—old china, or silver, or lace, I can understand, but orchids—things that require no end of trouble to keep them alive, and which I daresay are as common as buttercups and daisies in the savage places where they grow. There is Lady Jane Vawdrey now, a perfect slave to her orchid-houses."

Violet's pale face flamed crimson at this mention of Lady Jane. Not for worlds would she have asked a question about her old playfellow, though she was dying to hear about him. Happily no one saw that sudden blush, or it passed for a reflection of the fire-glow.

"Poor Lady Jane!" sighed the incumbent of

Beechdale, looking very solemn, "she has gone to a land in which there are fairer flowers than ever grew on the banks of the Amazon."

"What do you mean?"

"Surely you have heard——"

"Nothing," exclaimed Mrs. Tempest. "I have corresponded with nobody but my housekeeper while I have been away. I am a wretched correspondent at the best of times, and, after dear Edward's death, I was too weary, too depressed to write letters. What is the matter with Lady Jane Vawdrey?"

"She died at Florence last November of bronchitis. She was very ill last winter, and had to be taken to Cannes for the early part of the year; but she came back in April quite well and strong, as everyone supposed, and spent the summer at Briarwood. Her doctors told her, however, that she was not to risk another winter in England, so in September she went to Italy, taking Lady Mabel with her."

"And Roderick?" inquired Vixen. "He went with them of course."

"Naturally," replied Mr. Scobel. "Mr. Vawdrey was with his mother till the last."

"Very nice of him," murmured Mrs. Tempest approvingly; "for, in a general way, I don't think they got on too well together. Lady Jane was rather dictatorial. And now, I suppose, Roderick will marry his cousin as soon as he is out of mourning."

"Why should you suppose so, mamma?" exclaimed Violet. "It was quite a mistake of yours about their being engaged. Roderick told me so himself. He was not engaged to Lady Mabel. He had not the least idea of marrying her."

"He has altered his mind since then, I conclude," said Mr. Scobel cheerily—those binoculars of his could never have seen through a stone-wall, and were not much good at seeing things under his nose—"for it is quite a settled thing that Mr. Vawdrey and Lady Mabel are to be married. It will be a splendid match for him, and will make him the largest landowner in the Forest, for Ashbourne is settled on Lady Mabel. The

Duke bought it himself, you know, and it is not in the entail," added the incumbent, explaining a fact that was as familiar as the church catechism to Violet, who sat looking straight at the fire, holding her head as high as Queen Guinevere after she had thrown the diamonds out of window.

"I always knew that it would be so," said Mrs. Tempest, with the air of a sage. "Lady Jane had set her heart upon it. Worldly greatness was her idol, poor thing! It is sad to think of her being snatched away from everything. What has become of the orchids?"

"Lady Jane left them to her niece. They are building houses to receive them at Ashbourne."

"Rather a waste of money, isn't it?" suggested Violet, in a cold hard voice. "Why not let them stay at Briarwood till Lady Mabel is mistress there?"

Mr. Scobel did not enter into this discussion. He sat serenely gazing at the fire, and sipping his tea, enjoying this hour of rest and warmth after a long day's fatigue and hard weather. He had an Advent service at seven o'clock that evening,

and would but just have time to tramp home through the winter dark, and take a hurried meal, before he ran across to his neat little vestry and shuffled on his surplice, while Mrs. Scobel played her plaintive voluntary on the twenty-guinea harmonium.

"And where is young Vawdrey now?" inquired Mrs. Tempest blandly.

She could only think of the Squire of Briarwood as the lad from Eton—clumsy, shy, given to breaking teacups, and leaving the track of his footsteps in clay or mud upon the Aubusson carpets.

"He has not come home yet. The Duke and Duchess went to Florence just before Lady Jane's death, and I believe Mr. Vawdrey is with them in Rome. Briarwood has been shut up since September."

"Didn't I tell you, mamma, that somebody would be dead," cried Violet. "I felt when we came into this house yesterday evening, that everything in our lives was changed."

"I should hardly think mourning can be very

becoming to Lady Mabel," ruminated Mrs. Tempest. "Those small sylph-like figures rarely look well in black."

Mr. Scobel rose with an effort to make his adieux. The delicious warmth of the wood-fire, the perfume of arbutus logs, had made him sleepy.

"You'll come and see our new school, I hope," he said to Violet, as they shook hands. "You and your dear mamma have contributed so largely to its erection that you have a right to be critical; but I really think you will be pleased."

"We'll come to-morrow afternoon, if it's fine, said Mrs. Tempest graciously. "You must bring Mrs. Scobel to dinner at seven, and then we can talk over all we have seen."

"You are very kind. I've my young women's scripture-class at a quarter-past eight; but if you will let me run away for an hour——"

"Certainly."

"I can come back for Mrs. Scobel. Thanks. We shall be delighted."

When he was gone, Violet walked towards the door without a word to her mother.

"Violet, are you going away again? Pray stop, child, and let us have a chat."

"I have nothing to talk about, mamma."

"Nonsense. You have quite deserted me since we came home. And do you suppose I don't feel dull and depressed as well as you? It is not dutiful conduct, Violet. I shall really have to engage a companion if you go on so. Miss McCroke was dreary, but she was not altogether uncompanionable. One could talk to her."

"You had better have a companion, mamma. Someone who will be lively, and talk pleasantly about nothing particular all day long. No doubt a well-trained companion can do that. She has an inexhaustible well-spring of twaddle in her own mind. I feel as if I could never be cheerful again."

"We had better have stopped at Brighton——"

"I hate Brighton!"

"Where we knew so many nice people——"

"I detest nice people!"

"Violet, do you know that you have an abominable temper?"

"I know that I am made up of wickedness!" answered Vixen vehemently.

She left the room without another word, and went straight to her den upstairs, not to throw herself on the ground, and abandon herself to a childish unreasoning grief, as she had done on the night of Roderick's coming of age, but to face the situation boldly. She walked up and down the dim fire-lit room, thinking of what she had just heard.

"What does it matter to me? Why should I be so angry?" she asked herself. "We were never more than friends and playfellows. And I think that, on the whole, I rather disliked him. I know I was seldom civil to him. He was papa's favourite. I should hardly have tolerated him but for that."

She felt relieved at having settled this point in her mind. Yet there was a dull blank sense of loss, a vague aching in her troubled heart, which she could not get rid of easily. She walked to and fro, to and fro, while the fire faded out and the pale windows darkened.

"I hate myself for being so vexed about this," she said, clasping her hands above her head with a vehemence that showed the intensity of her vexation. "Could I—I—Violet Tempest—ever be so despicable a creature as to care for a man who does not care for me; to be angry, sorry, broken-hearted, because a man does not want me for his wife? Such a thing is not possible; if it were, I think I would kill myself. I should be ashamed to live. I could not look human beings in the face. I should take poison, or turn Roman Catholic and go into a convent, where I should never see the face of a man again. No; I am not such an odious creature. I have no regard for Rorie except as my old playfellow, and when he comes home I will walk straight up to him and give him my hand, and congratulate him heartily on his approaching marriage. Perhaps Lady Mabel will ask me to be one of her bridesmaids. She will have a round dozen, I daresay. Six in pink, and six in blue, no doubt, like wax dolls at a charity-fair. Why can't people be married without making idiots of themselves?"

The half-hour gong sounded at this moment, and Vixen ran down to the drawing-room, where the candles and lamps were lighted, and where there was plenty of light literature lying about to distract the troubled mind. Violet went to her mother's chair and knelt beside it.

"Dear mamma, forgive me for being cross just now," she said gently; "I was out of spirits. I will try to be better company in future—so that you may not be obliged to engage a companion."

"My dear, I don't wonder at your feeling low-spirited," replied Mrs. Tempest graciously. "This place is horribly dull. How we ever endured it, even in your dear papa's time, is more than I can understand. It is like living on the ground-floor of one of the Egyptian pyramids. We must really get some nice people about us, or we shall both go melancholy mad."

CHAPTER XIII.

"HE BELONGS TO THE TAME-CAT SPECIES."

Life went on smoothly enough at the Abbey House after that evening. Violet tried to make herself happy among the surroundings of her childhood, petted the horses, drove her basket-carriage with the favourite old pony, went among the villagers, rode her thoroughbred bay for long wild explorations of the Forest and neighbouring country, looked with longing eyes, sometimes, at the merry groups riding to the meet, and went her lonely way with a heavy heart. No more hunting for her. She could not hunt alone, and she had declined all friendly offers of escort. It would have seemed a treason against her beloved dead to ride across country by anyone else's side.

Everyone had called at the Abbey House and welcomed Mrs. Tempest and her daughter back to Hampshire. They had been asked to five-o'clock

tea at Ellangowan Park, to see the marvellous orchid. They had been invited to half-a-dozen dinner-parties.

Violet tried her utmost to persuade her mother that it was much too soon after her father's death to think of visiting.

"My dear Violet," cried the widow, "after going to that ball at Brighton, we could not possibly decline invitations here. It would be an insult to our friends. If we had not gone to the ball——"

"We ought not to have gone," exclaimed Vixen.

"My love, you should have said so at the time."

"Mamma, you know I was strongly against it."

Mrs. Tempest shrugged her shoulders as who should say: "This is too much!"

"I know your dress cost a small fortune, and that you danced every waltz, Violet," she answered, "that is about all I do know."

"Very well, mamma, let us accept all the invitations. Let us be merry as grigs. Perhaps

it will make papa more comfortable in Paradise to know how happy we are without him. He won't be troubled by any uneasy thoughts about our grief, at all events," added Vixen, with a stifled sob.

"How irreverently you talk. Mr. Scobel would be dreadfully shocked to hear you," said Mrs. Tempest.

The invitations were all accepted, and Mrs. Tempest for the rest of the winter was in a flutter about her dresses. She was very particular as to the exact shade of silver-gray or lavender which might be allowed to relieve the sombre mass of black; and would spend a whole morning in discussing the propriety of a knot of scarlet ribbon, or a border of gold passementerie.

They went to Ellangowan Park and did homage to the wonderful orchid, and discussed Roderick's engagement to the Duke's only daughter. Everybody said that it was Lady Jane's doing, and there were some who almost implied that she had died on purpose to bring about the happy conjuncture. Violet was able to talk quite pleasantly about the

marriage, and to agree with everybody's praises of Lady Mabel's beauty, elegance, good style, and general perfection.

Christmas and the New Year went by, not altogether sadly. It is not easy for youth to be full of sorrow. The clouds come and go, there are always glimpses of sunshine. Violet was grateful for the kindness that greeted her everywhere among her old friends, and perhaps a little glad of the evident admiration accorded to her beauty in all circles. Life was just tolerable, after all. She thought of Roderick Vawdrey as of something belonging to the past; something which had no part, never would have any part, in her future life. He too was dead and passed away, like her father. Lady Mabel's husband, the master of Briarwood *in esse*, and of Ashbourne *in posse*, was quite a different being from the rough lad with whom she had played at battledore and shuttlecock, billiards, croquet, and rounders.

Early in February Mrs. Tempest informed her daughter that she was going to give a dinner.

"It will seem very dreadful without dearest

Edward," she said; "but of course having accepted hospitalities, we are bound to return them."

"Do you really think we ought to burst out into dinner-parties so soon, mamma?"

"Yes, dear, as we accepted the dinners. If we had not gone it would have been different."

"Ah," sighed Vixen, "I suppose it all began with that ball at Brighton, like 'Man's first disobedience, and the fruit——'"

"I shall miss poor McCroke to fill in the invitation cards."

"Let me do it, mamma. I can write a decent hand. That is one of the few ladylike accomplishments I have been able to master; and even that is open to objection as being too masculine."

"If you would slope more, Violet, and make your up-strokes finer, and not cross your T's so undeviatingly," Mrs. Tempest murmured amiably. "A lady's T ought to be less pronounced. There is something too assertive in your consonants."

Violet wrote the cards. The dinner was to be quite a grand affair, three weeks' notice, and a

French cook from The Dolphin at Southampton to take the conduct of affairs in the kitchen; whereby the Abbey House cook declared afterwards that there was nothing that Frenchman did which she could not have done quite as well, and that his wastefulness was enough to make a Christian woman's hair stand on end.

Three days before the dinner, Vixen, riding Arion home through the shrubbery, after a long morning in the Forest, was startled by the vision of a dog-cart a few yards in front of her, a cart which, at the first glance, she concluded must belong to Roderick Vawdrey. The wheels were red, the horse had a rakish air, the light vehicle swung from side to side as it spun round the curve.

No; that slim figure, that neat waist, that military air did not belong to Roderick Vawdrey.

"He here!" ejaculated Vixen inwardly, with infinite disgust. "I thought we had seen the last of him."

She had been out for two hours and a half, and felt that Arion had done quite enough, or she would have turned her horse's head and gone back

to the Forest, in order to avoid this unwelcome visitor.

"I only hope mamma won't encourage him to come here," she thought; "but I'm afraid that smooth tongue of his has too much influence over her. And I haven't even poor Crokey to stand by me. I shall feel like a bird transfixed by the wicked green eyes of a velvet-pawed murdering cat."

"And I have not a friend in the world," she thought. "Plenty of pleasant acquaintance, ready to simper at me and pay me compliments, because I am Miss Tempest of the Abbey House, but not one honest friend to stand by me, and turn that man out of doors. How dare he come here? I thought I spoke plainly enough that night at Brighton."

She rode slowly up to the house, slipped lightly out of her saddle, and led her horse round to the stables, just as she had led the pony in her happy childish days. The bright thoroughbred bay was as fond of her as if he had been a dog, and as tame. She stood by his manger caressing him while he

ate his corn, and feeling very safe from Captain Winstanley's society in the warm clover-scented stable.

She dawdled away half-an-hour in this manner, before she went back to the house, and ran up to her dressing-room.

"If mamma sends for me now, I shan't be able to go down," she thought. "He can hardly stay more than an hour. Oh, horror! he is a tea-drinker; mamma will persuade him to stop till five o'clock."

Violet dawdled over her change of dress as she had dawdled in the stable. She had never been more particular about her hair.

"I'll have it all taken down, Phœbe," she told her Abigail; "I'm in no hurry."

"But really, miss, it's beautiful——"

"Nonsense, after a windy ride; don't be lazy, Phœbe. You may give my hair a good brushing while I read."

A tap at the door came at this moment, and Phœbe ran to open it.

"Mrs. Tempest wishes Miss Tempest to come

down to the drawing-room directly," said a voice in the corridor.

"There now, miss," cried Phœbe, "how lucky I didn't take your hair down. It never was nicer."

Violet put on her black dress, costly and simple as the attire Polonius recommended to his son. Mrs. Tempest might relieve her costume with what bright or delicate hues she liked. Violet had worn nothing but black since her father's death. Her sole ornaments were a pair of black earrings, and a large black enamel locket, with one big diamond shining in the middle of it, like an eye. This locket held the Squire's portrait, and his daughter wore it constantly.

The Louis Quatorze clock on the staircase struck five as Violet went down.

"Of course he is staying for tea," she thought, with an impatient shrug of her shoulders. "He belongs to the tame-cat species, and has an inexhaustible flow of gossip, spiced with mild malevolence. The kind of frivolous ill-nature which says: 'I would not do anyone harm for the

world, but one may as well think the worst of everybody.'"

Yes, kettledrum was in full swing. Mrs. Scobel had come over from her tiny vicarage for half-an-hour's chat, and was sitting opposite her hostess's fire, while Captain Winstanley lounged with his back to the canopied chimneypiece, and looked benignantly down upon the two ladies. The Queen Anne kettle was hissing merrily over its spirit-lamp, the perfume of the pekoe was delicious, the logs blazed cheerily in the low fireplace, with its shining brass andirons. Not a repulsive picture, assuredly; yet Vixen came slowly towards this charmed circle, looking black as thunder.

Captain Winstanley hurried forward to receive her.

"How do you do?" she said, as stiffly as a child brought down to the drawing-room, bristling in newly-brushed hair and a best frock, and then turning to her mother, she asked curtly: "What did you want with me, mamma?"

"It was Captain Winstanley who asked to see you, my dear. Won't you have some tea?"

"Thanks, no," said Vixen, seating herself in a corner between Mrs. Scobel and the mantelpiece, and beginning to talk about the schools.

Conrad Winstanley gave her a curious look from under his dark brows, and then went on talking to her mother. He seemed hardly disconcerted by her rudeness.

"Yes, I assure you, if it hadn't been for the harriers, Brighton would have been unbearable after you left," he said. "I ran across to Paris directly the frost set in. But I don't wonder you were anxious to come back to such a lovely old place as this."

"I felt it a duty to come back," said Mrs. Tempest, with a pious air.. "But it was very sad at first. I never felt so unhappy in my life. I am getting more reconciled now. Time softens all griefs."

"Yes," said the Captain, in a louder tone than before, "Time is a clever horse. There is nothing he won't beat if you know how to ride him."

"You'll take some tea?" insinuated Mrs. Tempest, her attention absorbed by the silver

kettle, which was just now conducting itself as spitfireishly as any blackened block-tin on a kitchen hob.

"I can never resist it. And perhaps after tea you will be so good as to give me the treat you talked about just now."

"To show you the house," said Mrs. Tempest. "Do you think we shall have light enough?"

"Abundance. An old house like this is seen at its best in the twilight. Don't you think so, Mrs. Scobel?"

"Oh, yes," exclaimed Mrs. Scobel, with a lively recollection of her album. "'They who would see Melrose aright should see it'—I think, by-the-bye, Sir Walter Scott says, 'by moonlight.'"

"Yes, for an ancient Gothic abbey; but twilight is better for a Tudor manor-house. Are you sure it will not fatigue you?" inquired the Captain, with an air of solicitude, as Mrs. Tempest rose languidly.

"No; I shall be very pleased to show you the dear old place. It is full of sad associations, of

course, but I do not allow my mind to dwell upon them more than I can help."

"No," cried Vixen bitterly. "We go to dinner-parties, and kettledrums, and go into raptures about orchids and old china, and try to cure our broken hearts that way."

"Are you coming, Violet?" asked her mother sweetly.

"No, thanks, mamma. I am tired after my ride. Mrs. Scobel will help you to play cicerone?"

Captain Winstanley left the room without so much as a look at Violet Tempest. Yet her rude reception had galled him more than any cross that fate had lately inflicted upon him. He had fancied that time would have softened her feelings towards him, that rural seclusion and the society of rustic nobodies would have made him appear at an advantage, that she would have welcomed the brightness and culture of metropolitan life in his person. He had hoped a great deal from the lapse of time since their last meeting. But this sullen reception, this silent expression of dislike, told him that Violet Tempest's aversion was a plant of deep root.

"The first woman who ever disliked me," he thought. "No wonder that she interests me more than other women. She is like that chestnut mare that threw me six times before I got the better of her. Yet she proved the best horse I ever had, and I rode her till she hadn't a leg to stand upon, and then sold her for twice the money she cost me. There are two conquests a man can make over a woman, one to make her love him, the other——"

"That suit of chain-armour was worn by Sir Gilbert Tempest at Acre," said the widow. "The plate-armour belonged to Sir Percy, who was killed at Barnet. Each of them was knighted before he was five-and-twenty years old, for prowess in the field. The portrait over the chimneypiece is the celebrated Judge Tempest, who was famous for—— Well, he did something wonderful, I know. Perhaps Mrs. Scobel remembers," concluded Mrs. Tempest feebly.

"It was at the trial of the seven bishops," suggested the Vicar's wife.

"In the time of Queen Elizabeth," assented

Mrs. Tempest. "That one with the lace cravat and steel breastplate was an admiral in Charles the Second's reign, and was made a baronet for his valiant behaviour when the Dutch fleet were at Chatham. The baronetcy died with his son, who left only daughters. The eldest married a Mr. Percival, who took the name of Tempest, and sat for the borough of—— Perhaps Mrs. Scobel knows. I have such a bad memory for these things; though I have heard my dear husband talk about them often."

Captain Winstanley looked round the great oak-panelled hall dreamily, and heard very little of Mrs. Tempest's vague prattling about her husband's ancestors.

What a lovely old place, he was thinking. A house that would give a man importance in the land, supported, as it was, by an estate bringing in something between five and six thousand a year. How much military distinction, how many battles must a soldier win before he could make himself master of such a fortune?

"And it needed but for that girl to like me, and a little gold ring would have given me the

freehold of it all," thought Conrad Winstanley bitterly.

How many penniless girls, or girls with fortunes so far beneath the measure of a fine gentleman's needs as to be useless, had been over head and ears in love with the elegant Captain; how many pretty girls had tempted him by their beauty and winsomeness to be false to his grand principle that marriage meant promotion. And here was an obstinate minx who could have realised all his aims, and whom he felt himself able to love to distraction into the bargain; and, behold, some adverse devil had entered into her mind, and made Conrad Winstanley hateful to her.

"It's like witchcraft," he said to himself. "Why should this one woman be different from all other women? Perhaps it's the colour. That ruddy auburn hair, the loveliest I ever saw, means temper. But I conquered the chestnut, and I'll conquer Miss Tempest—or make her smart for it."

"A handsome music-gallery, is it not?" said the widow. "The carved balustrade is generally admired."

Then they went into the dining-room, and looked cursorily at about a dozen large dingy pictures of the Italian school, which a man who knew anything about art would have condemned at a glance. Fine examples of brown varnish, all of them. Thence to the library, with its carved-oak dwarf bookcases, containing books which nobody had opened for a generation—Livy, Gibbon, Hume, Burke, Smollett, Plutarch, Thompson. These sages, clad in shiny brown leather and gilding, made as good a lining for the walls as anything else, and gave an air of snugness to the room in which the family dined when there was no company.

They came presently to the Squire's den, at the end of a corridor.

"That was my dear husband's study," sighed Mrs. Tempest. "It looks south, into the rose garden, and is one of the prettiest rooms in the house. But we keep it locked, and I think Violet has the key."

"Pray don't let Miss Tempest be disturbed," said Captain Winstanley. "I have seen quite enough to know what a delightful house you have

—all the interest of days that are gone, all the luxuries of to-day. I think that blending of past and present is most fascinating. I should never be a severe restorer of antiquity, or refuse to sit in a chair that wasn't undeniably Gothic."

"Ah," sighed the Vicar's wife, who was an advanced disciple in the school of Eastlake, "but don't you think that everything should be in harmony? If I were as rich as Mrs. Tempest, I wouldn't have so much as a teapot that was not strictly Tudor."

"Then I'm afraid you'd have to go without a teapot, and drink your tea out of a tankard," retorted Captain Winstanley.

"At any rate, I would be as Tudor as I could be."

"And not have a brass bedstead, a spring mattress, a moderator lamp, or a coal-scuttle in your house," said the Captain. "My dear madam, it is all very well to be mediæval in matters ecclesiastic, but home comforts must not be sacrificed to the pursuit of the æsthetic, or a modern

luxury discarded because it looks like an anachronism."

Mrs. Scobel was delighted with Captain Winstanley. He was just the kind of man to succeed in a rustic community. His quiet self-assurance set other people at their ease. He carried with him an air of life and movement, as if he were the patentee of a new pleasure.

"My husband would be so pleased to see you at the vicarage, if you are staying any time in the neighbourhood," she said.

But after the little gush of friendliness, she reflected that there could not be much sympathy between the man of society and her Anglican parson; and that it was she, and not Ignatius Scobel, who would be glad to see Captain Winstanley at the vicarage.

"I shall be charmed," he replied. "I never was so delighted with any place as your Forest. It is a new world to me. I hate myself for having lived in England so long without knowing this beautiful corner of the land. I

am staying with my old chief, Colonel Pryke, at Warham Court, and I am only here for a few days."

"But you are coming to my dinner-party?" said Mrs. Tempest.

"That is a pleasure I cannot deny myself."

"And you will come and see our church and schools?" said Mrs. Scobel.

"I shall be more than pleased. I passed your pretty little church, I think, on my way here. There was a tin tea-ket—a bell ringing——"

"For vespers," exclaimed Mrs. Scobel.

The exploration of the house took a long time, conducted in this somewhat desultory and dawdling manner; but the closing in of night and the sound of the dinner-gong gave the signal for Captain Winstanley's departure.

Mrs. Tempest would have liked to ask him to dinner; but she had an idea that Violet might make herself objectionable, and refrained from this exercise of hospitality. He was coming to the great dinner. He would see her dress with the feather

trimming, which was really prettier that Worth's masterpiece, or, at any rate, newer; though it only came from Madame Theodore, of Bruton Street. Sustained by this comforting reflection, she parted with him quite cheerfully.

CHAPTER XIV.

"HE WAS WORTHY TO BE LOVED A LIFETIME."

CONRAD WINSTANLEY had come to the New Forest with his mind resolved upon one of two things. He meant to marry Violet Tempest or her mother. If the case was quite hopeless with the daughter, he would content himself with winning the lesser prize; and though Vanity whispered that there was no woman living he might not win for himself if he chose to be sufficiently patient and persevering, instinct told him that Violet frankly detested him.

"After all," argued Worldly Wisdom, "the alternative is not to be despised. The widow is somewhat rococo; an old-fashioned jewel kept in cotton-wool, and brought out on occasions, to shine with a factitious brilliancy, like old Dutch garnets backed with tinfoil; but she is still pretty. She is ductile, amiable, and weak to a degree that promises a husband the sovereign dominion. Why break

your heart for this fair devil of a daughter, who looks capable, if offended, of anything in the way of revenge, from a horsewhip to slow poison? Are a pair of brown eyes and a coronal of red gold hair worth all this wasted passion?"

"But the daughter is the greater catch," urged Ambition. "The dowager's jointure is well enough, and she has the Abbey House and gardens for her life, but Violet will be sole mistress of the estate when she comes of age. As Violet's husband, your position would be infinitely better than it could be as her stepfather. Unhappily, the cantankerous minx has taken it into her head to dislike you."

"Stay," interjected the bland voice of Vanity, "may not this dislike be only an assumption, a mask for some deeper feeling? There are girls who show their love in that way. Do not be in a hurry to commit yourself to the mother until you have made yourself quite sure about the daughter."

Mrs. Tempest's dinner-party was a success. It introduced Captain Winstanley to all that was best in the surrounding society; for although in Switzerland he had seemed very familiar with the best

people in the Forest, in Hampshire he appeared almost a stranger to them. It was generally admitted, however, that the Captain was an acquisition, and a person to be cultivated. He sang a French comic song almost as well as Monsieur de Roseau, recited a short Yankee poem, which none of his audience had ever heard before, with telling force. He was at home upon every subject, from orchids to steam-ploughs, from ordnance to light literature. A man who sang so well, talked so well, looked so well, and behaved so well, could not be otherwise than welcome in county society. Before the evening was over, Captain Winstanley had been offered three hunters for the next day's run, and had been asked to write his name in four birthday-books.

Violet did not honour him with so much as a look, after her one cold recognition of his first appearance in the drawing-room. It was a party of more than twenty people, and she was able to keep out of his way without obvious avoidance of him. He was stung, but had no right to be offended.

He took Mrs. Scobel in to dinner, and Mrs. Scobel played the accompaniment of his song, being a clever little woman, able to turn her hand to anything. He would have preferred to be told off to some more important matron, but was not sorry to be taken under Mrs. Scobel's wing. She could give him the *carte du pays,* and would be useful to him, no doubt, in the future; a social Iris, to fetch and carry for him between Beechdale and the Abbey House.

"Do you know that I am quite in love with your Forest?" he said to Mrs. Tempest, standing in front of the ottoman where that lady sat with two of her particular friends; "so much so, that I am actually in treaty for Captain Hawbuck's cottage, and mean to stay here till the end of the hunting."

Everybody knew Captain Hawbuck's cottage, a verandahed box of a house, on the slope of the hill above Beechdale.

"I'm afraid you'll find the drawing-room chimney smoke," said a matter-of-fact lady in sea-green; "poor Mrs. Hawbuck was a martyr to that chimney."

"What does a bachelor want with a drawing-room? If there is one sitting-room in which I can burn a good fire, I shall be satisfied. The stable is in very fair order."

"The Hawbucks kept a pony-carriage," assented the sea-green lady.

"If Mrs. Hawbuck accepts my offer, I shall send for my horses next week," said the Captain.

Mrs. Tempest blushed. Her life had flowed in so gentle and placid a current, that the freshness of her soul had not worn off, and at nine-and-thirty she was able to blush. There was something so significant in Captain Winstanley's desire to establish himself at Beechdale, that she could not help feeling fluttered by the fact. It might be on Violet's account, of course, that he came; yet Violet and he had never got on very well together.

"Poor fellow!" she thought blandly, "if he for a moment supposes that anything would tempt me to marry again, he is egregiously mistaken."

And then she looked round the lovely old room, brightened by a crowd of well-dressed people, and thought that next to being Edward Tempest's wife,

the best thing in life was to be Edward Tempest's widow.

"Dear Edward!" she mused, "how strange that we should miss him so little to-night."

It had been with everyone as if the Squire had never lived. Politeness exacted this ignoring of the past, no doubt; but the thing had been so easily done. The noble presence, the jovial laugh, the friendly smile were gone, and no one seemed conscious of the void—no one but Violet, who looked round the room once when conversation was liveliest, with a pale indignant face, resenting this forgetfulness.

"I wish papa's ghost would come in at that door and scare his hollow-hearted friends," she said to herself; and she felt as if it would hardly have been a surprise to her to see the door open slowly and that familiar figure appear.

"Well, Violet," Mrs. Tempest said sweetly, when the guests were gone, "how do you think it all went off?"

"It," of course, meant the dinner-party.

"I suppose, according to the nature of such

things, it was all right and proper," Vixen answered coldly; "but I should think it must have been intensely painful to you, mamma."

Mrs. Tempest sighed. She had always a large selection of sighs in stock, suitable to every occasion.

"I should have felt it much worse if I had sat in my old place at dinner," she said; "but sitting at the middle of the table instead of at the end made things less painful. And I really think it's better style. How did you like the new arrangement of the glasses?"

"I didn't notice anything new."

"My dear Violet, you are frightfully unobservant."

"No, I am not," answered Vixen quickly. "My eyes are keen enough, believe me."

Mrs. Tempest felt uncomfortable. She began to think that, after all, it might be a comfortable thing to have a companion—as a fender between herself and Violet. A perpetually present Miss Jones or Smith would ward off these unpleasantnesses.

There are occasions, however, on which a position must be faced boldly—in proverbial phrase, the bull must be taken by the horns. And here, Mrs. Tempest felt, was a bull which must be so encountered. She knew that her poor little hands were too feeble for the office; but she told herself that she must make the heroic attempt.

"Violet, why have you such a rooted dislike to Captain Winstanley?"

"Why is my hair the colour it is, mamma, or why are my eyes brown instead of blue? If you could answer my question, I might be able to answer yours. Nature made me what I am, and nature has implanted a hatred of Captain Winstanley in my mind."

"Do you not think it wrong to hate anyone—the very word hate was considered unladylike when I was a girl—without cause?"

"I have cause to hate him, good cause, sufficient cause. I hate all self-seekers and adventurers."

"You have no right to call him one or the other."

"Have I not? What brings him here, but the pursuit of his own interest? Why does he plant himself at our door as if he were come to besiege a town? Do you mean to say, mamma, that you can be so blind as not to see what he wants?"

"He has come for the hunting."

"Yes, but not to hunt our foxes or our stags. He wants a rich wife, mamma. And he thinks that you or I will be foolish enough to marry him."

"There would be nothing unnatural in his entertaining some idea of that kind about you," replied Mrs. Tempest, with a sudden assertion of matronly dignity. "But for him to think of me in that light would be too absurd. I must be some years, perhaps four or five years, his senior, to begin with."

"Oh, he would forgive you that; he would not mind that."

"And he ought to know that I should never dream of marrying again."

"He ought, if he had any idea of what is right and noble in a woman," answered Vixen. "But he has not. He has no ideas that do not begin and

end in himself and his own advantage. He sees you here with a handsome house, a good income, and he thinks that he can persuade you to marry him."

"Violet, you must know that I shall never marry."

"I hope I do know it. But the world ought to know it too. People ought not to be allowed to whisper, and smile, and look significant; as I saw some of your friends do to-night when Captain Winstanley was hanging over your chair. You ought not to encourage him, mamma. It is a treason against my father to have that man here."

Here was a bull that required prompt and severe handling, but Mrs. Tempest felt her powers inadequate to the effort.

"I am surprised at you, Violet!" she exclaimed; "as if I did not know, as well as you, what is due to my poor Edward; as if I should do anything to compromise my own dignity. Is it to encourage a man to ask him to a dinner-party, when he happens to be visiting in the neighbour-

hood? Can I forbid Captain Winstanley to take the Hawbucks' cottage?"

"No, you have gone too far already. You gave him too much encouragement in Switzerland, and at Brighton. He has attached himself to us like a limpet to a rock. You will not easily get rid of him; unless you let him see that you understand and despise him."

"I see nothing despicable in him, and I am not going to insult him at your bidding," answered the widow, tremulous with anger. "I do not believe him to be a schemer or an adventurer. He is a gentleman by birth, education, profession. It is a supreme insolence on your part to speak of him as you do. What can you know of the world? How can you judge and measure a man like Captain Winstanley? A girl like you, hardly out of the nursery! It is too absurd. And understand at once and for ever, Violet, that I will not be hectored or lectured in this manner, that I will not be dictated to, or taught what is good taste, in my own house. This is to be my own house, you know, as long as I live."

"Yes; unless you give it a new master," said Violet gravely. "Forgive me if I have been too vehement, mamma. It is my love that is bold. Whom have I in this world to love now, except you? And when I see you in danger—when I see the softness of your nature—— Dear mother, there are some instincts that are stronger than reason. There are some antipathies which are implanted in us for warnings. Remember what a happy life you led with my dear father—his goodness, his overflowing generosity, his noble heart. There is no man worthy to succeed him, to live in his house. Dear mother, for pity's sake——"

She was kneeling at her mother's feet, clinging to her hands, her voice half-choked with sobs. Mrs. Tempest began to cry too.

"My dearest Violet, how can you be so foolish? My love, don't cry. I tell you that I shall never marry again—never. Not if I were asked to become a countess. My heart is true to your dear father; it always will be. I am almost sorry that I consented to these scarlet bows on my dress, but the feather trimming looked so heavy without them,

and Theodore's eye for colour is perfect. My dear child, be assured I shall carry his image with me to my grave."

"Dear mother, that is all I ask. Be as happy as you can; but be true to him. He was worthy to be loved for a lifetime; not to be put off with half a life, half a heart."

CHAPTER XV.

LADY SOUTHMINSTER'S BALL.

Captain Winstanley closed with Mrs. Hawbuck for the pretty little verandah-surrounded cottage on the slope of the hill above Beechdale. Captain Hawbuck, a retired naval man, to whom the place had been very dear, was in his grave, and his wife was anxious to try if she and her hungry children could not live on less money in Belgium than they could in England. The good old post-captain had improved and beautified the place from a farm-labourer's cottage into a habitation which was the quintessence of picturesque inconvenience. Ceilings which you could touch with your hand; funny little fireplaces in angles of the rooms; a corkscrew staircase, which a stranger ascended or descended at peril of life or limb; no kitchen worth mentioning, and stuffy little bedrooms under the thatch. Seen from the outside the cottage was charming; and if

the captain and his family could only have lived over the way, and looked at it, they would have had full value for the money invested in its improvement. Small as the rooms were, however, and despite that dark slander which hung over the chimneys, Captain Winstanley declared that the cottage would suit him admirably.

"I like the situation," he said, discussing his bargain in the coffee-room at The Crown, Lyndhurst.

"I should rather think you did!" cried Mr. Bell, the local surgeon. "Suits you down to the ground, doesn't it?"

Whereby it will be seen that there was already a certain opinion in the neighbourhood as to the Captain's motive for planting himself at Beechdale —so acute is a quiet little community of this kind in divining the intentions of a stranger.

Captain Winstanley took up his quarters at Beechdale Cottage in less than a week after Mrs. Tempest's dinner-party. He sent for his horses, and began the business of hunting in real earnest. His two hunters were unanimously pro-

nounced screws; but it is astonishing how well a good rider can get across country on a horse which other people call a screw. Nobody could deny Captain Winstanley's merits as a horseman. His costume and appointments had all the finish of Melton Mowbray, and he was always in the first flight.

Before he had occupied Captain Hawbuck's cottage a month the new-comer had made friends for himself in all directions. He was as much at home in the Forest as if he had been native and to the manner born. His straight riding, his good looks, and agreeable manners won him everybody's approval. There was nothing dissipated or Bohemian about him. His clothes never smelt of stale tobacco. He was as punctual at church every Sunday morning as if he had been a family man, bound to set a good example. He subscribed liberally to the hounds, and was always ready with those stray florins and half-crowns by which a man purchases a cheap popularity among the horse-holding and ragged-follower class.

Having distinctly asserted her intention of

remaining a widow to Violet, Mrs. Tempest allowed herself the privilege of being civil to Captain Winstanley. He dropped in at afternoon tea at least twice a week; he dined at the Abbey House whenever the Scobels or any other intimate friends were there "in a quiet way." He generally escorted Mrs. Tempest and her daughter from church on a Sunday morning, Violet persistently loitering twenty yards or so behind them on the narrow woodland path that led from Beechdale to the Abbey House.

After walking home from church with Mrs. Tempest, it was only natural that the Captain should stop to luncheon, and after luncheon—the Sabbath afternoon being, in a manner, a legitimate occasion for dawdling—it was equally natural for him to linger, looking at the gardens and greenhouses, or talking beside the drawing-room fire, till the appearance of the spitfire Queen-Anne tea-kettle and Mrs. Tempest's infusion of orange pekoe.

Sometimes the Scobels were present at these Sunday luncheons, sometimes not. Violet was with

her mother, of course, on these occasions; but, while bodily present, she contrived to maintain an attitude of aloofness which would have driven a less resolute man than Conrad Winstanley to absent himself. A man more sensitive to the opinions of others could hardly have existed in such an atmosphere of dislike; but Captain Winstanley meant to live down Miss Tempest's aversion, or to give her double cause for hating him.

"Why have you given up hunting, Miss Tempest?" he asked one Sunday afternoon, when they had gone the round of the stables, and Arion had been fondled and admired—a horse as gentle as an Italian greyhound in his stable, as fiery as a wild-cat out of it.

"Because I have no one I care to hunt with, now papa is gone."

"But here in the Forest, where everybody knows you, where you might have as many fathers as the Daughter of the Regiment——"

"Yes, I have many kind friends. But there is not one who could fill my father's place—for an hour."

"It is a pity," said the Captain sympathetically. "You were so fond of hunting, were you not?"

"Passionately."

"Then it is a shame you should forego the pleasure. And you must find it very dull, I should think, riding alone in the Forest."

"Alone! I have my horse."

"Surely he does not count as a companion."

"Indeed he does. I wish for no better company than Arion, now papa is gone."

"Violet is so eccentric!" Mrs. Tempest murmured gently.

Captain Winstanley had taken Mrs. Hawbuck's cottage till the first of May. The end of April would see the last of the hunting, so this arrangement seemed natural enough. He hunted in good earnest. There was no pretence about him. It was only the extra knowing ones, the little knot of choice spirits at The Crown, who saw some deeper motive than a mere love of sport for his residence at Beechdale. These advanced minds had contrived to find out all about Captain Winstanley by this time—the date of his selling out, his ostensible

and hidden reasons for leaving the army, the amount of his income, and the general complexion of his character. There was not much to be advanced against him. No dark stories; only a leading notion that he was a man who wanted to improve his fortunes, and would not be over-scrupulous as to the means. But as your over-scrupulous man is one in a thousand, this was ranking Captain Winstanley with the majority.

The winter was over; there were primroses peeping out of the moss and brambles, and a shy little dog-violet shining like a blue eye here and there. The flaunting daffodils were yellow in every glade, and the gummy chestnut buds were beginning to swell. It was mid-March, and as yet there had been no announcement of home-coming from Roderick Vawdrey or the Dovedales. The Duke was said to have taken a fancy to the Roman style of fox-hunting; Lady Mabel was studying art; the Duchess was suspected of a leaning to Romanism; and Roderick was dancing attendance upon the family generally.

"Why should he not stay there with them?"

said Mr. Scobel, sipping his pekoe in a comfortable little circle of gossipers round Mrs. Tempest's gipsy table. "He has very little else to do with his life. He is a young man utterly without views or purpose. He is one of our many Gallios. You could not rouse him to an interest in those stirring questions that are agitating the Catholic Church to her very foundation. He has no mission. I have sounded him, and found him full of a shallow good-nature. He would build a church if people asked him, and hardly know, when it was finished, whether he meant it for Jews or Gentiles."

Vixen sat in her corner and said nothing. It amused her rather — with a half-bitter sense of amusement—to hear them talk about Roderick. He had quite gone out of her life. It interested her to know what people thought of him in his new world.

"If the Duke doesn't bring them all home very soon the Duchess will go over to Rome," said Mrs. Scobel, with conviction. "She had been drifting that way for ever so long. Ignatius isn't high enough for her."

The Reverend Ignatius sighed. He hardly saw his way to ascending any higher. He had already, acting always in perfect good faith and conscientious desire for the right, made his pretty little church obnoxious to many of the simple old Foresters, to whom a pair of brazen candlesticks on an altar were among the abominations of Baal, and a crucifix as hateful as the image of Ashtaroth; obstinate old people of limited vision, who wanted Mr. Scobel to stick to what they called the old ways, and read the Liturgy as they had heard it when they were children. In the minds of these people, Mr. Scobel's self-devotion and hard service were as nothing, while he cut off the ten commandments from the Sunday morning service, and lighted his altar candles at the early celebration.

It was in this month of March that an event impended which caused a considerable flutter among the dancing population of the Forest. Lord Southminster's eldest daughter, Lady Almira Ringwood, was to marry Sir Ponto Jones, the rich ironmaster —an alliance of ancient aristocracy and modern wealth which was considered one of the grandest

achievements of the age, like the discovery of steam or the electric telegraph; and after the marriage, which was to be quietly performed in the presence of about a hundred and fifty blood relations, there was to be a ball, to which all the county families were bidden, with very little more distinction or favouritism than in the good old fairy-tale times, when the king's herald went through the streets of the city to invite everybody, and only some stray Cinderella, cleaning boots and knives in a back kitchen, found herself unintentionally excluded. Lady Southminster drew the line at county families, naturally, but her kindly feelings allowed a wide margin for parsons, doctors, and military men—and among these last Captain Winstanley received a card.

Mrs. Scobel declared that this ball would be a grand thing for Violet. "You have never properly come out, you know, dear," she said; "but at Southminster you will be seen by everybody; and, as I daresay Lady Ellangowan will take you under her wing, you'll be seen to the best advantage."

"Do you think Lady Ellangowan's wing will make any difference—in me?" inquired Vixen.

"It will make a great deal of difference in the Southminster set," replied Mrs. Scobel, who considered herself an authority upon all social matters.

She was a busy good-natured little woman, the chosen confidante of all her female friends. People were always appealing to her on small social questions, what they ought to do or to wear on such and such an occasion. She knew the wardrobes of her friends as well as she knew her own. "I suppose you'll wear that lovely pink," she would say when discussing an impending dinner-party. She gave judicious assistance in the composition of a *menu*. "My love, everyone has pheasants at this time of year. Ask your poulterer to send you guinea-fowls, they are more *distingué*," she would suggest. Or: "If you have dessert ices, let me recommend you coffee-cream. We had it last week at Ellangowan Park."

Vixen made no objection to the Southminster ball. She was young, and fond of waltzing.

Whirling easily round to the swing of some German melody, in a great room garlanded with flowers, was a temporary cessation of all earthly care, the idea of which was in no wise unpleasant to her. She had enjoyed her waltzes even at that charity-ball at the Pavilion, to which she had gone so unwillingly.

The March night was fine, but blustery, when Mrs. Tempest and her daughter started for Southminster. The stars were shining in a windy sky, the tall forest trees were tossing their heads, the brambles were shivering, and a shrill shriek came up out of the woodland every now and then like a human cry for help.

Mrs. Tempest had offered to take Mrs. Scobel and Captain Winstanley in her roomy carriage. Mr. Scobel was not going to the ball. All such entertainments were an abhorrence to him; but this particular ball, being given in Lent, was more especially abhorrent.

"I shouldn't think of going for my own amusement," Mrs. Scobel told her husband, "but I want to see Violet Tempest at her first local dance. I

want to see the impression she makes. I believe she will be the belle of the ball."

"That would mean the belle of South Hants," said the parson. "She has a beautiful face for a painted window—there is such a glow of colour."

"She is absolutely lovely, when she likes," replied his wife; "but she has a curious temper; and there is something very repellent about her when she does not like people. Strange, is it not, that she should not like Captain Winstanley?"

"She would be a very noble girl under more spiritual influences," sighed the Reverend Ignatius. "Her present surroundings are appallingly earthly. Horses, dogs, a table loaded with meat in Lent and Advent, a total ignoring of daily matins and evensong. It is sad to see those we like treading the broad path so blindly. I feel sorry, my dear, that you should go to this ball."

"It is only on Violet's account," repeated Mrs. Scobel. "Mrs. Tempest will be thinking of nothing but her dress; there will be nobody interested in that poor girl."

Urged thus, upon purely benevolent grounds,

Mr. Scobel could not withhold his consent; more especially as he had acquired the habit of letting his wife do what she liked on most occasions—a marital custom not easily broken through. So Mrs. Scobel, who was an economical little woman, "did up" her silver-gray silk dinner-dress with ten shillings' worth of black tulle and pink rosebuds, and felt she had made a success that Madame Elise might have approved. Her faith in the silver-gray and rosebuds was just a little shaken by her first view of Mrs. Tempest and Violet: the widow in black velvet, rose-point, and scarlet—Spanish as a portrait by Velasquez; Violet in black and gold, with stephanotis in her hair.

The drive was a long one, well over ten miles, along one of those splendid straight roads which distinguish the New Forest. Mrs. Tempest and Mrs. Scobel were in high spirits, and prattled agreeably all the way, only giving Captain Winstanley time to get a word in edgeways now and then. Violet looked out of the window and held her peace. There was always a charm for her in that dark silent forest, those waving branches and flitting

clouds, stars gleaming like lights on a stormy sea. She was not much elated at the idea of the ball, and "that small, small, imperceptibly small talk" of her mother's and Mrs. Scobel's was beyond measure wearisome to her.

"I hope we shall get there after the Ellangowans," said Mrs. Scobel, when they had driven through the little town of Ringwood, and were entering a land of level pastures and fertilising streams, which seemed wonderfully tame after the undulating forest; "it would be so much nicer for Violet to be in the Ellangowan set from the first."

"I beg to state that Miss Tempest has promised me the first waltz," said Captain Winstanley. "I am not going to be ousted by any offshoot of nobility in Lady Ellangowan's set."

"Oh, of course, if Violet has promised—— What a lot of carriages! I'm afraid there'll be a block presently."

There was every prospect of such a calamity. A confluence of vehicles had poured into a narrow lane bounded on one side by a treacherous water-

meadow, on the other by a garden-wall. They all came to a standstill, as Mrs. Scobel had prophesied. For a quarter of an hour there was no progress whatever, and a good deal of recrimination among coachmen, and then the rest of the journey had to be done at a walking pace.

The reward was worth the labour when, at the end of a long winding drive, the carriage drew up before the Italian front of Southminster House; a white marble portico, long rows of tall windows brilliantly lighted, a vista of flowers, and statues, and lamps, and pictures, and velvet hangings, seen through the open doorway.

"Oh, it is too lovely!" cried Violet, fresh as a schoolgirl in this new delight; "first the dark forest and then a house like this—it is like Fairyland."

"And you are to be the queen of it—my queen," said Conrad Winstanley in a low voice. "I am to have the first waltz, remember that. If the Prince of Wales were my rival I would not give way."

He detained her hand in his as she alighted

from the carriage. She snatched it from him angrily.

"I have a good mind not to dance at all," she said.

"Why not?"

"It is paying too dearly for the pleasure to be obliged to dance with you."

"In what school did you learn politeness, Miss Tempest?"

"If politeness means civility to people I despise, I have never learnt it," answered Vixen.

There was no time for further skirmishing. He had taken her cloak from her, and handed it to the attendant nymph, and received a ticket; and now they were drifting into the tea-room, where a row of ministering footmen were looking at the guests across a barricade of urns and teapots, with countenances that seemed to say: "If you want anything, you must ask for it. We are here under protest, and we very much wonder how our people could ever have invited such rabble!"

"I always feel small in a tea-room when there are only men in attendance," whispered Mrs. Scobel,

"they are so haughty. I would sooner ask Gladstone or Disraeli to pour me out a cup of tea than one of those supercilious creatures."

Lady Southminster was stationed in the Teniers room—a small apartment at the beginning of the suite which ended in the picture-gallery or ball-room. She was what Joe Gargery called "a fine figure of a woman," in ruby velvet and diamonds, and received her guests with an indiscriminating cordiality which went far to heal the gaping wounds of county politics.

The Ellangowans had arrived, and Lady Ellangowan, who was full of good-nature, was quite ready to take Violet under her wing when Mrs. Scobel suggested that operation.

"I can find her any number of partners," she said. "Oh, there she goes—off already—with Captain Winstanley."

The Captain had lost no time in exacting his waltz. It was the third on the programme, and the band were beginning to warm to their work. They were playing a waltz by Offenbach—"*Les Traineaux*"—with an accompaniment of jingling

sleigh-bells—music that had an almost maddening effect on spirits already exhilarated.

The long lofty picture-gallery made a magnificent ball-room—a polished floor of dark wood—a narrow line of light under the projecting cornice, the famous Paul Veronese, the world-renowned Rubens, the adorable Titian—ideal beauty looking down with art's eternal tranquillity upon the whisk and whirl of actual life—here a calm Madonna, contemplating, with deep unfathomable eyes, these brief ephemera of a night—there Judith with a white muscular arm holding the tyrant's head aloft above the dancers—yonder Philip of Spain frowning on this Lenten festival.

Violet and Captain Winstanley waltzed in a stern silence. She was vexed with herself for her loss of temper just now. In his breast there was a deeper anger. "When will my day come?" he asked himself. "When shall I be able to bow this proud head, to bend this stubborn will?" It must be soon — he was tired of playing his submissive part — tired of holding his cards hidden.

They held on to the end of the waltz—the last clash of the sleigh-bells.

"Who's that girl in black and gold?" asked a Guardsman of Lady Ellangowan; "those two are the best dancers in the room—it's a thousand to nothing on them."

That final clash of the bells brought the Captain and his partner to anchor at the end of the gallery, which opened through an archway into a spacious palm-house with a lofty dome. In the middle of this archway, looking at the dancers, stood a figure at sight of which Violet Tempest's heart gave a great leap, and then stood still.

It was Roderick Vawdrey. He was standing alone, listlessly contemplating the ball-room, with much less life and expression in his face than there was in the pictured faces on the walls.

"That was a very nice waltz, thanks," said Vixen, giving the Captain a little curtsy.

"Shall I take you back to Mrs. Tempest?"

Roderick had seen her by this time, and was coming towards her with a singularly grave and distant countenance, she thought; not at all like

the Rorie of old times. But of course that was over and done with. She must never call him Rorie any more, not even in her own thoughts. A sharp sudden memory thrilled her, as they stood face to face in that brilliant gallery—the memory of their last meeting in the darkened room on the day of her father's funeral.

"How do you do?" said Roderick, with a gush of originality. "Your mamma is here, I suppose."

"Haven't you seen her?"

"No; we've only just come."

"We," no doubt, meant the Dovedale party, of which Mr. Vawdrey was henceforth a member.

"I did not know you were to be here," said Vixen, "or even that you were in England."

"We only came home yesterday, or I should have called at the Abbey House. We have been coming home, or talking about it, for the last three weeks. A few days ago the Duchess took it into her head that she ought to be at Lady Almira's wedding—there's some kind of relationship, you know, between the Ashbournes and the

Southminsters—so we put on a spurt, and here we are."

"I am very glad," said Vixen, not knowing very well what to say; and then seeing Captain Winstanley standing stiffly at her side, with an aggrieved expression of countenance, she faltered: "I beg your pardon, I don't think you have ever met Mr. Vawdrey. Captain Winstanley—Mr. Vawdrey."

Both gentlemen acknowledged the introduction with the stiffest and chilliest of bows; and then the Captain offered Violet his arm, and she, having no excuse for refusing it, submitted quietly to be taken away from her old friend. Roderick made no attempt to detain her.

The change in him could hardly have been more marked, Vixen thought. Yes, the old Rorie—playfellow, scapegoat, friend of the dear old childish days—was verily dead and gone.

"Shall we go and look at the presents?" asked Captain Winstanley.

"What presents?"

"Lady Almira's wedding presents. They are

all laid out in the library. I hear they are very splendid. Everybody is crowding to see them."

"I daresay mamma would like to go, and Mrs. Scobel," suggested Vixen.

"Then we will all go together."

They found the two matrons side by side on a settee, under a lovely girlish head by Greuze. They were both delighted at the idea of seeing the presents. It was something to do. Mrs. Tempest had made up her mind to abjure even square dances this evening. There was something incongruous in widowhood and the Lancers; especially in one's own neighbourhood.

CHAPTER XVI.

RORIE ASKS A QUESTION.

The library was one of the finest rooms at Southminster. It was not like the library at Althorpe—a collection for a nation to be proud of. There was no priceless Decameron, no Caxton Bible, no inestimable "Book of Hours," or early Venetian Virgil; but as a library of reference, a library for all purposes of culture or enjoyment, it left nothing to be desired. It was a spacious and lofty room, lined from floor to ceiling with exquisitely bound books; for, if not a collector of rare editions, Lord Southminster was at least a connoisseur of bindings. Creamy vellum, flowered with gold, antique brown calf, and russia in every shade of crimson and brown, gave brightness to the shelves, while the sombre darkness of carved oak made a background for this variety of colour.

Not a mortal in the crowded library this evening

thought of looking at the books. The room had been transformed into a bazaar. Two long tables were loaded with the wedding gifts which rejoicing friends and aspiring acquaintances had lavished upon Lady Almira. Each gift was labelled with the name of the giver; and the exhibition was full of an intensely personal interest. Everybody wanted to see what everybody else had given. Most of the people looking at the show had made their offerings, and were anxious to see if their own particular contributions appeared to advantage.

Here Mrs. Scobel was in her element. She explained everything, expatiated upon the beauty and usefulness of everything. If she had assisted at the purchase of all these gifts, or had actually chosen them, she could not have been more familiar with their uses and merits.

"You must look at the silver candelabra presented by Sir Ponto's workpeople, so much more sensible than a bracelet. I don't think Garrard—yes, it is Garrard—ever did anything better; so sweetly mythological—a goat and a dear little

chubby boy, and ever so many savage-looking persons with cymbals."

"The education of Jupiter, perhaps," suggested Captain Winstanley.

"Of course. The savage persons must be teaching him music. Have you seen this liqueur cabinet, dear Mrs. Tempest? The most exquisite thing, from the servants at Southminster. Could anything be nicer?"

"Looks rather like a suggestion that Lady Almira may be given to curaçoa on the quiet," said the Captain.

"And this lovely, lovely screen in crewels, by the Ladies Ringwood, after a picture by Alma Tadema," continued Mrs. Scobel. "Was there ever anything so perfect? And to think that our poor mothers worked staring roses and gigantic lilies in Berlin wool and glass beads, and imagined themselves artistic!"

The ladies went the round of the tables, in a crush of other ladies, all rapturous. The Louis-Quatorze fans, the carved ivory, the Brussels point, the oxydised silver glove-boxes, and malachite

blotting-books, the pearls, opals, ormolu; the antique tankards and candlesticks, Queen-Anne teapots; diamond stars, combs, tiaras; prayer-books, and "Christian Years." The special presents which stood out from this chaos of commonplace were—a *rivière* of diamonds from the Earl of Southminster, a cashmere shawl from Her Majesty, a basket of orchids, valued at five hundred guineas, from Lady Ellangowan, a pair of priceless crackle jars, a Sèvres dinner-service of the old *bleu-du-roi*, a set of knives of which the handles had all been taken from stags slaughtered by the Southminster hounds.

"This is all very well for the wallflowers," said Captain Winstanley to Violet, "but you and I are losing our dances."

"I don't much care about dancing," answered Vixen wearily.

She had been looking at this gorgeous display of bracelets and teacups, silver-gilt dressing-cases, and ivory hairbrushes, without seeing anything. She was thinking of Roderick Vawdrey, and how odd a thing it was that he should seem so utter a stranger to her.

"He has gone up into the ducal circle," she said to herself. "He is translated. It is almost as if he had wings. He is certainly as far away from me as if he were a bishop."

They struggled back to the picture-gallery, and here Lady Ellangowan took possession of Violet, and got her distinguished partners for all the dances till supper-time. She found herself receiving a gracious little nod from Lady Mabel Ashbourne in the ladies' chain. Neither the lapse of two years nor the experiences of foreign travel had made any change in the hope of the Dovedales. She was still the same sylph-like being, dressed in palest green, the colour of a duck's egg, with diamonds in strictest moderation, and pearls that would have done honour to a princess.

"Do you think Lady Mabel Ashbourne very beautiful?" Vixen asked Lady Ellangowan, curious to hear the opinion of experience and authority.

"No; she's too shadowy for my taste," replied her ladyship, who was the reverse of sylph-like. "Wasn't there someone in Greek mythology who fell in love with a cloud? Lady Mabel would just

suit that sort of person. And then she is over-educated and conceited; sets up for a modern Lady Jane Grey, quotes Greek plays, I believe, and looks astounded if people don't understand her. She'll end by establishing a female college, like Tennyson's princess."

"Oh, but she is engaged to be married to Mr. Vawdrey."

"Her cousin? Very foolish! That may go off by-and-by. First engagements seldom come to anything."

Violet thought herself a hateful creature for being inwardly grateful to Lady Ellangowan for this speech.

She had seen Roderick spinning round with his cousin. He was a good waltzer, but not a graceful one. He steered his way well, and went with a strong swing that covered a great deal of ground; but there was a want of finish. Lady Mabel looked as if she were being carried away by a maelstrom. And now people began to move towards the supper-rooms, of which there were two, luxuriously arranged with numerous round

tables in the way that was still a novelty when "Lothair" was written. This gave more room for the dancers. The people for whom a ball meant a surfeit of perigord pie, truffled turkey, salmon *mayonnaise*, and early strawberries, went for their first innings, meaning to return to that happy hunting-ground as often as proved practicable. Violet was carried off by a partner who was so anxious to take her to supper that she felt sure he was dying to get some for himself.

Her cavalier found her a corner at a snug little table with three gorgeous matrons. She ate a cutlet and a teaspoonful of peas, took three sips from a glass of champagne, and wound up with some strawberries, which tasted as if they had been taken by mistake out of the pickle-jar.

"I'm afraid you haven't had a very good supper," said her partner, who had been comfortably wedged between two of the matrons, consuming *mayonnaise* and *pâté* to his heart's content.

"Excellent, thanks. I shall be glad to make room for someone else." Whereat the unfortunate

young man was obliged to stand up, leaving the choicest morsel of truffled goose-liver on his plate.

The crowd in the picture-gallery was thinner when Violet went back. In the doorway she met Roderick Vawdrey.

"Haven't you kept a single dance for me, Violet?" he asked.

"You didn't ask me to keep one."

"Didn't I? Perhaps I was afraid of Captain Winstanley's displeasure. He would have objected, no doubt."

"Why should he object, unless I broke an engagement to him?"

"Would he not? Are you actually free to be asked by anyone? If I had known that two hours ago! And now, I suppose, your programme is full. Yes, to the very last galop; for which, of course, you won't stop. But there's to be an extra waltz presently. You must give me that."

She said neither yes nor no, and he put her hand through his arm and led her up the room.

"Have you seen mamma?"

"Yes, she thinks I am grown. She forgets that I was one-and-twenty when we last met. That does not leave much margin for growing, unless a man went on getting taller indefinitely, like Lord Southminster's palms. He had to take the roof off his palm-house last year, you know. What a dreadful thing if I were to become a Norfolk giant—giants are indigenous to Norfolk, aren't they?—and were obliged to take the roof off Briarwood. Have you seen the Duchess?"

"Only in the distance. I hardly know her at all, you know."

"That's absurd. You ought to know her very well. You must be quite intimate with her by-and-by, when we are all settled down as steady-going married people."

The little gloved hand on his arm quivered ever so slightly. This was a distinct allusion to his approaching marriage.

"Lovely room, isn't it? Just the right thing for a ball. How do you like the Rubens? Very grand—a magnificent display of carmines—beautiful,

if you are an admirer of Rubens. What a draughtsman! The Italian school rarely achieved that freedom of pencil. Isn't that Greuze enchanting? There is an innocence, a freshness, about his girlish faces that nobody has ever equalled. His women are not Madonnas, or Junos, or Helens — they are the incarnation of girlhood; girlhood without care or thought; girlhood in love with a kitten, or weeping over a wounded robin-redbreast."

How abominably he rattled on. Was it the overflow of joyous spirits? No doubt. He was so pleased with life and fate, that he was obliged to give vent to his exuberance in this gush of commonplace.

"You remind me of Miss Bates, in Jane Austen's 'Emma,'" said Vixen, laughing.

The band struck up "*Trauriges Herz*," a waltz like a wail, but with a fine swing in it.

"Now for the old three-time," said Roderick; and in the next minute they were sailing smoothly over the polished floor, with all the fair pictured faces, the crimson draperies, the pensive Madonnas,

Dutch boors, Italian temples, and hills, and skies, circling round them like the figures in a kaleidoscope.

"Do you remember our boy-and-girl waltzes in the hall at the Abbey House?" asked Rorie.

Happily for Vixen her face was so turned that he could not see the quiver of her lips, the sudden look of absolute pain that paled her cheeks.

"I am not likely to forget any part of my childhood," she answered gravely. "It was the one happy period of my life."

"You don't expect me to believe that the last two years have been altogether unhappy."

"You may believe what you like. You who knew my father, ought to know——"

"The dear Squire! do you think I am likely to undervalue him, or to forget your loss? No, Violet, no. But there are compensations. I heard of you at Brighton. You were very happy there, were you not?"

"I liked Brighton pretty well. And I had Arion there all the while. There are some capital rides on the Downs."

"Yes, and you had agreeable friends there."

"Yes, we knew a good many pleasant people, and went to a great many concerts. I heard all the good singers, and Madame Goddard ever so many times."

They went on till the end of the waltz, and then walked slowly round the room, glancing at the pictures as they went by. The Duchess was not in sight.

"Shall we go and look at the palms?" asked Roderick, when they came to the archway at the end of the gallery.

"If you like."

"This was the roof that had to be taken off, you know. It is a magnificent dome, but I daresay the palms will outgrow it within Lord Southminster's time."

It was like entering a jungle in the tropics; if one could fancy a jungle paved with encaustic tiles, and furnished with velvet-covered ottomans for the repose of weary sportsmen.

There was only a subdued light, from lamps thinly sprinkled among the ferns and flowers.

There were four large groups of statuary, placed judiciously, and under the central dome there was a fountain, where, half hidden by a veil of glittering spray, Neptune was wooing Tyro, in the aspect of a river-god, amongst bulrushes, lilies, and water-plants.

Violet and her companion looked at the tropical plants, and admired, with a delightful ignorance of the merits of these specimens. The tall shafts and the thick tufts of huge leaves were not Vixen's idea of beauty.

"I like our beeches and oaks in the Forest ever so much better," she exclaimed.

"Everything in the Forest is dear," said Rorie.

Vixen felt, with a curious choking sensation, that this was a good opening for her to say something polite. She had always intended to congratulate him, in a straightforward sisterly way, upon his engagement to Lady Mabel.

"I am so glad to hear you say that," she began. "And how happy you must be to think that your fate is fixed here irrevocably; doubly fixed now;

for you can have no interest to draw you away from us, as you might if you were to marry a stranger. Briarwood and Ashbourne united will make you the greatest man among us."

"I don't highly value that kind of greatness, Violet—a mere question of acreage; but I am glad to think myself anchored for life on my native soil."

"And you will go into Parliament and legislate for us, and take care that we are not disforested. They have taken away too much already, with their horrid enclosures."

"The enclosures will make splendid pine-woods by-and-by."

"Yes, when we are all dead and gone."

"I don't know about Parliament. So long as my poor mother was living I had an incentive to turn senator, she was so eager for it. But now that she is gone, I don't feel strongly drawn that way. I suppose I shall settle down into the approved pattern of country squire: breed fat cattle—the aristocratic form of cruelty to animals—spend the best part of my income upon agricultural

machinery, talk about guano, like the Duke, and lecture delinquents at quarter-sessions."

"But Lady Mabel will not allow that. She will be ambitious for you."

"I hope not. I can fancy no affliction greater than an ambitious wife. No. My poor mother left Mabel her orchids. Mabel will confine her ambition to orchids and literature. I believe she writes poetry, and some day she will be tempted to publish a small volume, I daresay. 'Æolian Echoes,' or 'Harp Strings,' or 'Broken Chords,' or 'Consecutive Fifths,' or something of that kind."

"You believe!" exclaimed Vixen. "Surely you have read some of Lady Mabel's poetry, or heard it read. She must have read some of her verses to you."

"Never. She is too reserved, and I am too candid. It would be a dangerous experiment. I should inevitably say something rude. Mabel adores Shelley and Browning; she reads Greek, too. Her poetry is sure to be unintelligible, and I should expose my obtuseness of intellect. I couldn't even look as if I understood it."

"If I were Lady Mabel, I think under such circumstances I should leave off writing poetry."

"That would be quite absurd. Mabel has a hundred tastes which I do not share with her. She is devoted to her garden and hothouses. I hardly know one flower from another, except the forest wildlings. She detests horses and dogs. I am never happier than when among them. She reads Æschylus as glibly as I can read a French newspaper. But she will make an admirable mistress for Briarwood. She has just that tranquil superiority which becomes the ruler of a large estate. You will see what cottages and schools we shall build. There will not be a weed in our allotment gardens, and our farm-labourers will get all the prizes at cottage flower-shows.

"You will hunt, of course?"

"Naturally; don't you know that I am to have the hounds next year? It was all arranged a few days ago. Poor Mabel was strongly opposed to the plan. She thought it was the first stage on the road to ruin; but I think I convinced her that it was the natural thing for the owner of Briar-

wood; and the Duke was warmly in favour of it."

"The dear old kennels!" said Vixen, "I have never seen them since—since I came home. I ride by the gate very often, but I have never had courage to go inside. The hounds wouldn't know me now."

"You must renew your friendship with them. You will hunt, of course, next year?"

"No, I shall never hunt again!"

"Oh, nonsense; I hear that Captain Winstanley is a mighty Nimrod—quite a Leicestershire man. He will wish you to hunt."

"What can Captain Winstanley have to do with it?" asked Vixen, turning sharply upon him.

"A great deal, I should imagine, by next season."

"I haven't the least idea what you mean."

It was Roderick Vawdrey's turn to look astonished. He looked both surprised and angry.

"How fond young ladies are of making mysteries about these things," he exclaimed impatiently; "I suppose they think it enhances

their importance. Have I made a mistake? Have my informants misled me? Is your engagement to Captain Winstanley not to be talked about yet—only an understood thing among your own particular friends? Let me at least be allowed the privilege of intimate friendship. Let me be among the first to congratulate you."

"What folly have you been listening to?" cried Vixen; "you, Roderick Vawdrey, my old playfellow—almost an adopted brother—to know me so little."

"What could I know of you to prevent my believing what I was told? Was there anything strange in the idea that you should be engaged to Captain Winstanley? I heard that he was a universal favourite."

"And did you think that I should like a universal favourite?"

"Why should you not? It seemed credible enough, and my informant was positive; he saw you together at a picnic in Switzerland. It was looked upon as a settled thing by all your friends."

"By Captain Winstanley's friends, you mean.

They may have looked upon it as a settled thing that he should marry someone with plenty of money, and they may have thought that my money would be as useful as anyone else's."

"Violet, are you mystifying me? are you trying to drive me crazy? or is this the simple truth?"

"It is the simple truth."

"You are not engaged to this man?—you never have been?—you don't care for him, never have cared for him?"

"Never, never, never, never!" said Violet, with unmistakable emphasis.

"Then I have been the most consummate——"

He did not finish his sentence, and Violet did not ask him to finish it. The ejaculation seemed involuntary. He sat staring at the palms, and said nothing for the next minute and a half, while Vixen unfurled her great black and gold fan, and looked at it admiringly, as if she had never seen it before.

"Do you really think those palms will break through the roof again, in the present Lord Southminster's time?" Roderick inquired presently, with intense interest.

Vixen did not feel herself called upon to reply to a question so purely speculative.

"I think I had better go and look for mamma and Mrs. Scobel," she said; "they must have come back from the supper-room by this time."

Roderick rose and offered her his arm. She was surprised to see how pale he looked when they came out of the dusk into the brilliant light of the gallery. But in a heated room, and between two and three o'clock in the morning, a man may naturally be a little paler than usual.

Roderick took Violet straight to the end of the room, where his quick eye had espied Mrs. Tempest in her striking black and scarlet costume. He said nothing more about the Duchess or Lady Mabel; and, indeed, took Violet past the elder lady, who was sitting in one of the deep-set windows with Lady Southminster, without attempting to bring about any interchange of civilities.

"Captain Winstanley has been kind enough to go and look for the carriage, Violet," said Mrs. Tempest. "I told him we would join him in the vestibule directly I could find you. Where have

you been all this time? You were not in the Lancers. Such a pretty set. Oh, here is Mrs. Scobel!" as the Vicar's wife approached them on her partner's arm, in a piteous state of dilapidation —not a bit of tulle puffing left, and all her rosebuds crushed as flat as dandelions.

"Such a delightful set!" she exclaimed gaspingly.

"I'm afraid your dress has suffered," said her partner.

"Not in the least," protested Mrs. Scobel, with the fortitude of that ladylike martyr to a clumsy carver, celebrated by Sydney Smith, who, splashed from head to foot, and with rills of brown gravy trickling down her countenance, vowed that not a drop had reached her.

"This," says the reverend wit, "I esteem the highest triumph of civilisation."

"Your carriage will be the third," the Captain told Mrs. Tempest, while Roderick was putting Violet's cloak round her in the vestibule; "there are a good many people leaving already."

Roderick went with them to the carriage door, and stayed in the porch till they were gone. The

last object Vixen saw under the Southminster lamps was the pale grave face of her old playfellow.

He went straight from the porch to the supper-room, not to find himself a place at one of the snug little tables, but to go to the buffet and pour out a glass of brandy, which he drank at a draught. Yet, in a general way, there was no man more abstemious than Roderick Vawdrey.

A quarter of an hour afterwards he was waltzing with Lady Mabel—positively the last dance before their departure.

"Roderick," she said in an awe-stricken undertone, "I am going to say something very dreadful. Please forgive me in advance."

"Certainly," he said, with a somewhat apprehensive look.

"Just now, when you were talking to me, I fancied you had been drinking brandy."

"I had."

"Absolute undiluted brandy!"

"Neat brandy, sometimes denominated 'short.'"

"Good heavens! were you ill?"

"I had had what people call 'a turn.'"

CHAPTER XVII.

WHERE THE RED KING WAS SLAIN.

May had come. The red glow of the beech-branches had changed to a tender green; the oaks were amber; the winding forest-paths, the deep inaccessible glades where the cattle led such a happy life, were blue with dog-violets and golden with primroses. Whitsuntide was close at hand, and good Mr. Scobel had given up his mind to church decoration, and the entertainment of his school-children with tea and buns in that delightful valley, where an iron monument, a little less artistic than a pillar post-office, marks the spot where the Red King fell.

Vixen, though not particularly fond of school-feasts, had promised to assist at this one. It was not to be a stiff or ceremonious affair. There was to be no bevy of young ladies, oppressively attentive to their small charges, causing the children to drink

scalding tea in a paroxysm of shyness. The whole thing was to be done in an easy and friendly manner; with no aid but that of the school-mistress and master. The magnates of the land were to have no part in the festival.

"The children enjoy themselves so much more when there are no finely-dressed people making believe to wait upon them," said Mrs. Scobel; "but I know they'll be delighted to have you, Violet. They positively adore you!"

"I'm sure I can't imagine why they should," answered Violet truthfully.

"Oh, but they do. They like to look at you. When you come into the school-room they're all in a flutter; and they point at you awfully, don't they, Miss Pierson?" said Mrs. Scobel, appealing to the school-mistress.

"Yes, ma'am. I can't cure them of pointing, do what I will."

"Oh, they are dear little children," exclaimed Violet, "and I don't care how much they point at me if they really like me. They make me such nice little bob-curtsies when I meet them in the

Forest, and they all seem fond of Argus. I'm sure you have made them extremely polite, Miss Pierson. I shall be very pleased to come to your school-feast, Mrs. Scobel; and I'll tell our good old Trimmer to make no end of cakes."

"My dear Violet, pray don't think of putting Mrs. Trimmer to any trouble. Your dear mamma might be angry."

"Angry at my asking for some cakes for the school-children, after being papa's wife for seventeen years! That couldn't be."

The school-feast was fixed, three weeks in advance, for the Wednesday in Whitsun week, and during the interval there were many small meteorologists in Beechdale school intent upon the changes of the moon, and all those varied phenomena from which the rustic mind draws its auguries of coming weather. The very crowing of early village cocks was regarded suspiciously by the school children at this period; and even the harmless domestic pussy, sitting with his back to the fire, was deemed a cat of evil omen.

It happened that the appointed Wednesday

was a day on which Mrs. Tempest had chosen to invite a few friends in a quiet way to her seven o'clock dinner; among the few Captain Winstanley, who had taken Mrs. Hawbuck's cottage for an extended period of three months. Mrs. Tempest had known all about the school-feast a fortnight before she gave her invitations, but had forgotten the date at the moment when she arranged her little dinner. Yet she felt offended that Violet should insist upon keeping her engagement to the Scobels.

"But, dear mamma, I am of no use to you at our parties," pleaded Vixen; "if I were at all necessary to your comfort I would give up the school-feast."

"My dear Violet, it is not my comfort I am considering; but I cannot help feeling annoyed that you should prefer to spend your evening with a herd of vulgar children—playing Oranges and Lemons, or Kiss in the Ring, or some other ridiculous game, and getting yourself into a most unbecoming perspiration—to a quiet home evening with a few friends."

"You see, mamma, I know our quiet home evenings with a few friends so well. I could tell you beforehand exactly what will happen, almost the very words people will say—how your *jardinières* will be admired, and how the conversation will glance off from your ferns and pelargoniums to Lady Ellangowan's orchids, and then drift back to your old china; after which the ladies will begin to talk about dress, and the wickedness of giving seven guineas for a summer bonnet, as Mrs. Jones, or Green, or Robinson has just done; from which their talk will glide insensibly to the iniquities of modern servants; and when those have been discussed exhaustively, one of the younger ladies will tell you the plot of the last novel she has had from Mudie's, with an infinite number of you knows and you sees, and then perhaps Captain Winstanley—he is coming, I suppose—will sing a French song, of which the company will understand about four words in every verse, and then you will show Mrs. Carteret your last piece of art needlework——"

"What nonsense you talk, Violet. However, if you prefer the children at Stony Cross to the society

of your mother and your mother's friends, you must take your own way."

"And you will forgive me in advance, dear mamma?"

"My love, I have nothing to forgive. I only deplore a bent of mind which I can but think unladylike."

Vixen was glad to be be let off with so brief a lecture. In her heart of hearts she was not at all sorry that her mother's friendly dinner should fall on a day which she had promised to spend elsewhere. It was a treat to escape the sameness of that polite entertainment. Yes, Captain Winstanley was to be there of course, and prolonged acquaintance had not lessened her dislike to that gentleman. She had seen him frequently during his residence at the Hawbuck cottage, not at her mother's house only, but at all the best houses in the neighbourhood. He had done nothing to offend her. He had been studiously polite; and that was all. Not by one word had he reminded Violet of that moonlight walk in the Pavilion garden; not by so much as a glance or a sigh had he hinted at a hidden

passion. So far she could make no complaint against him. But the attrition of frequent intercourse did not wear off the sharp edge of her dislike.

Wednesday afternoon came, and any evil auguries that had been drawn from the noontide crowing of restless village cocks were set at naught, for the weather was peerless; a midsummer sky and golden sunlight shone upon all things; upon white-walled cottages and orchards, and gardens where the pure lilies were beginning to blow, upon the yellow-green oak leaves and deepening bloom of the beech, and the long straight roads cleaving the heart of the Forest.

Violet had arranged to drive Mr. and Mrs. Scobel in her pony-carriage. She was at the door of their snug little vicarage at three o'clock; the vivacious Titmouse tossing his head and jingling his bit in a burst of pettishness at the aggravating behaviour of the flies.

Mrs. Scobel came fluttering out, with the Vicar behind her. Both carried baskets, and after them came an old servant, who had been Mrs. Scobel's

nurse, a woman with a figure like a hogshead of wine, and a funny little head at the top, carrying a third basket.

"The buns and bread have gone straight from the village," said the Vicar's wife. "How well you are looking, Violet. I hope dear Mrs. Tempest was not very angry at your coming with us."

"Dear Mrs. Tempest didn't care a straw," Vixen answered, laughing. "But she thinks me wanting in dignity for liking to have a romp with the school-children."

All the baskets were in by this time, and Titmouse was in a paroxysm of impatience; so Mr. and Mrs. Scobel seated themselves quickly, and Vixen gave her reins a little shake that meant Go, and off went the pony at a pace which was rather like running away.

The Vicar looked slightly uneasy.

"Does he always go as fast as this?" he inquired.

"Sometimes a good deal faster. He's an old fencer, you know, and hasn't forgotten his jumping

days. But of course I don't let him jump with the carriage."

"I should think not," ejaculated the Vicar; "unless you wanted to commit murder and suicide. Don't you think you could make him go a little steadier? He's going rather like a dog with a tin kettle at his tail, and if the kettle were to tip over——"

"Oh, he'll settle down presently," said Vixen coolly. "I don't want to interfere with him; it makes him ill-tempered. And if he were to take to kicking——"

"If you'll pull him up I think I'll get out and walk," said Mr. Scobel, the back of whose head was on a level with the circle which the pony's hoofs would have been likely to describe in the event of kicking.

"Oh, please don't!" cried Vixen. "If you do that I shall think you've no confidence in my driving."

She pulled Titmouse together, and coaxed him into an unobjectionable trot; a trot which travelled over the ground very fast, without giving the occu-

pants of the carriage the uncomfortable sensation of sitting behind a pony intent on getting to the sharp edge of the horizon and throwing himself over.

They were going up a long hill. Halfway up they came to the gate of the kennels. Violet looked at it with a curious half-reluctant glance that expressed the keenest pain.

"Poor papa," she sighed. "He never seemed happier than when he used to take me to see the hounds."

"Mr. Vawdrey is to have them next year," said Mrs. Scobel. "That seems right and proper. He will be the biggest man in this part of the country when the Ashbourne and Briarwood estates are united. And the Duke cannot live very long—a man who gives his mind to eating and drinking, and is laid up with the gout twice a year."

"Do you know when they are to be married?" asked Vixen, with an unconcerned air.

"At the end of this year, I am told. Lady Jane died last November. They would hardly have the wedding before a twelvemonth was over. Have

you seen much of Mr. Vawdrey since he came back?"

"I believe I have seen him three times: once at Lady Southminster's ball; once when he came to call upon mamma; once at a kettledrum at Ellangowan, where he was in attendance upon Lady Mabel. He looked rather like a little dog at the end of a string; he had just that meekly-obedient look, combined with an expression of not wanting to be there, which you see in a dog. If I were engaged, I should not take my *fiancé* to kettle-drums."

"Ah, Violet, when are you going to be engaged?" cried Mrs. Scobel, in a burst of playfulness. "Where is the man worthy of you?"

"Nowhere; unless Heaven would make me such a man as my father."

"You and Mr. Vawdrey were such friends when you were girl and boy. I used sometimes to fancy that childish friendship of yours would lead to a lasting attachment."

"Did you? That was a great mistake. I am not half good enough for Mr. Vawdrey. I was well

enough for a playfellow, but he wants something much nearer perfection in a wife."

"But your tastes are so similar."

"The very reason we should not care for each other."

"'In joining contrasts lieth love's delight.' That's what a poet has said, yet I can't quite believe it, Violet."

"But you see the event proves the poet's axiom true. Here is my old playfellow, who cares for nothing but horses and hounds and a country life, devotedly attached to Lady Mabel Ashbourne, who reads Greek plays with as much enjoyment as other young ladies derive from a stirring novel, and who hasn't an idea or an attitude that is not strictly æsthetic."

"Do you know, Violet, I am very much afraid that this marriage is rather the result of calculation than of genuine affection?" said Mrs. Scobel solemnly.

"Oh, no doubt it will be a grand thing to unite Ashbourne and Briarwood, but Roderick Vawdrey is too honourable to marry a girl he could not love.

I would never believe him capable of such baseness," answered Violet, standing up for her old friend.

Here they turned out of the Forest and drove through a peaceful colony consisting of half-a-dozen cottages, a rustic inn where reigned a supreme silence and sleepiness, and two or three houses in old-world gardens.

Vixen changed the conversation to buns and school-children, which agreeable theme occupied them till Titmouse had walked up a tremendously steep hill, the Vicar trudging through the dust beside him; and then the deep green vale in which Rufus was slain lay smiling in the sunshine below their feet.

Perhaps the panorama to be seen from the top of that hill is absolutely the finest in the Forest—a vast champaign, stretching far away to the white walls, tiled roofs, and ancient abbey-church of Romsey; here a glimpse of winding water, there a humble village—nameless save to its inhabitants—nestling among the trees, or basking in the broad sunshine of a common.

At the top of the hill, Bates, the gray-headed groom, who had attended Violet ever since her first pony-ride, took possession of Titmouse and the chaise, while the baskets were handed over to a lad, who had been on the watch for their arrival. Then they all went down the steep path into the valley, at the bottom of which the children were swarming in a cluster, as thick as bees, while a pale flame and a cloud of white smoke went up from the midst of them like the fire beneath a sacrifice. This indicated the boiling of the kettle, in true gipsy fashion.

For the next hour and a half tea-drinking was the all-absorbing business with everybody. The boiling of the kettle was a grand feature in the entertainment. Cups and saucers were provided by a little colony of civilised gipsies, who seem indigenous to the spot, and whose summer life is devoted to assisting at picnics and tea-drinkings, telling fortunes, and selling photographs. White cloths were spread upon the short sweet turf, and piles of bread-and-butter, cake and buns, invited the attention of the flies.

Presently arose the thrilling melody of a choral grace, with the sweet embellishment of a strong Hampshire accent. And then, with a swoop as of eagles on their quarry, the school-children came down upon the mountains of bread-and-butter, and ate their way manfully to the buns and cake.

Violet had never been happier since her return to Hampshire than she felt this sunny afternoon, as she moved quickly about, ministering to these juvenile devourers. The sight of their somewhat bovine contentment took her thoughts away from her own cares and losses; and presently, when the banquet was concluded—a conclusion only arrived at by the total consumption of everything provided, whereby the hungry-eyed gipsy attendants sunk into despondency—Vixen constituted herself Lord of Misrule, and led off a noisy procession in the time-honoured game of Oranges and Lemons, which entertainment continued till the school-children were in a high fever. After this they had Kiss in the Ring; Vixen only stipulating, before she began, that nobody should presume to drop the handkerchief before her. Then came Touchwood—a game

charmingly adapted to that wooded valley, where the trees looked as if they had been planted at convenient distances on purpose for this juvenile sport.

"Oh, I am so tired," cried Violet at last, when church clocks—all out of earshot in this deep valley—were striking eight, and the low sun was golden on the silvery beech-boles, and arrowy gleams of light touched the quiet half-hidden water-pools under the trees yonder; "I really don't think I can have anything to do with the next game."

"Oh, if you please, miss," cried twenty shrill young voices, "oh, if you please, miss, we couldn't play without you—you're the best on us!"

This soothing flattery had its effect.

"Oh, but I really don't think I can do more than start you," sighed Vixen, flushed and breathless, "what is it to be?"

"Blindman's Buff," roared the boys.

"Hunt the Slipper," screamed the girls.

"Oh, Blindman's Buff is best," said Vixen. "This little wood is a splendid place for Blindman's Buff. But mind, I shall only start you. Now then, who's to be Blindman?"

Mr. Scobel volunteered. He had been a tranquil spectator of the sports hitherto; but this was the last game, and he felt that he ought to do something more than look on. Vixen blindfolded him, asked him the usual question about his father's stable, and then sent him spinning amongst the moss-grown beeches, groping his way fearfully, with outstretched arms, amidst shrillest laughter and noisiest delight.

He was not long blindfold, and had not had many bumps against the trees before he impounded the person of a fat and scant-of-breath scholar, a girl whose hard breathing would have betrayed her neighbourhood to the dullest ear.

"That's Polly Sims, I know," said the Vicar.

It was Polly Sims, who was incontinently made as blind as Fortune or Justice, or any other of the deities who dispense benefits to man. Polly floundered about among the trees for a long time, making frantic efforts to catch the empty air, panting like a human steam-engine, and nearly knocking out what small amount of brains she might possess against the gray branches, out-

stretched like the lean arms of Macbeth's weird women across her path. Finally Polly Sims succeeded in catching Bobby Jones, whom she clutched with the tenacity of an octopus; and then came the reign of Bobby Jones, who was an expert at the game, and who kept the whole party on the *qui vive* by his serpentine windings and twistings among the stout old trunks.

Presently there was a shrill yell of triumph. Bobby had caught Miss Tempest.

"I know'd her by her musling gownd, and the sweet-smelling stuff upon her pocket-handkercher," he roared.

Violet submitted with a good grace.

"I'm dreadfully tired," she said, "and I'm sure I shan't catch anyone."

The sun had been getting lower and lower. There were splashes of ruddy light on the smooth gray beech-boles, and that was all. Soon these would fade, and all would be gloom. The grove had an awful look already. One would expect to meet some ghostly Druid, or some witch of eld, among the shadowy tracks left by the forest wild-

lings. Vixen went about her work languidly. She was really tired, and was glad to think her day's labours were over. She went slowly in and out among the trees, feeling her way with outstretched arms, her feet sinking sometimes into deep drifts of last year's leaves, or gliding noiselessly over the moss. The air was soft and cool and dewy, with a perfume of nameless wild flowers — a faint aromatic odour of herbs, which the wise women had gathered for medicinal uses in days of old, when your village sorceress was your safest doctor. Everywhere there was the hush and coolness of fast-coming night. The children's voices were stilled. This last stage of the game was a thing of breathless interest.

Vixen's footsteps drifted lower down into the wooded hollow; insensibly she was coming towards the edge of the treacherously green bog which has brought many a bold rider to grief in these districts, and still she had caught no one. She began to think that she had roamed ever so far away, and was in danger of losing herself altogether, or at least losing everybody else, and being

left by herself in the forest darkness. The grassy hollow in which she was wandering had an atmosphere of solitude.

She was on the point of taking off the handkerchief that Mr. Scobel had bound so effectually across her eyes, when her outstretched arms clasped something—a substantial figure, distinctly human, clad in rough cloth.

Before she had time to think who it was she had captured, a pair of strong arms clasped her; she was drawn to a broad chest; she felt a heart beating strong and fast against her shoulder, while lips that seemed too familiar to offend kissed hers with all the passion of a lover's kiss.

"Don't be angry," said a well-known voice. "I believe it's the rule of the game. If it isn't I'm sure it ought to be."

A hand, at once strong and gentle, took off the handkerchief, and in the soft woodland twilight she looked up at Roderick Vawdrey's face, looking down upon her with an expression which she presumed must mean a brotherly friendliness—the delight of an old friend at seeing her after a long interval.

She was not the less angry at that outrageous unwarrantable kiss.

"It is not the rule of the game amongst civilised people; though it possibly may be among ploughboys and servant-maids!" she exclaimed indignantly. "You are really a most ungentlemanlike person! I wonder Lady Mabel Ashbourne has not taught you better manners."

"Is that to be my only reward for saving you from plunging—at least ankle-deep—in the marshy ground yonder? But for me you would have been performing a boggy version of Ophelia by this time."

"How did you come here?"

"I have been to Langley Brook for a day's fly-fishing, and was tramping home across country in a savage humour at my poor sport, when I heard the chatter of small voices, and presently came upon the Scobels and the school-children. The juveniles were in a state of alarm at having lost you. They had been playing the game in severe silence, and at a turn in the grove had missed you altogether. Oh, here comes Scobel, with his trencher on the back of his head."

The Vicar came forward, rejoicing at sight of Violet's white gown.

"My dear, what a turn you have given us!" he cried; "those silly children, to let you out of their sight! I don't think a wood is a good place for Blindman's Buff."

"No more do I," answered Vixen, very pale.

"You look as if you had been frightened, too," said the Vicar.

"It did feel awfully lonely; not a sound, except the frogs croaking their vespers, and one dismal owl screaming in the distance. And how cold it has turned now the sun has gone down; and how ghostly the beeches look in their green mantles; there is something awful in a wood at sunset."

She ran on in an excited tone, masking her agitation under an unnatural vivacity. Roderick watched her keenly. Mr. and Mrs. Scobel went back to their business of getting the children together, and the pots, pans, and baskets packed for the return-journey. The children were inclined to be noisy and insubordinate. They would have liked to make a night of it in the woody hollow,

or on the gorse-clothed heights up yonder by Stony Cross. To go home after such a festival, and be herded in small stuffy cottages, was doubtless trying to free-born humanity, always more or less envious of the gipsies.

"Shall we walk up the hill together," Roderick asked Violet humbly, "while the Scobels follow with their flock?"

"I am going to drive Mr. and Mrs. Scobel," replied Vixen curtly.

"But where is your carriage?"

"I don't know. I rather think it was to meet us at the top of the hill."

"Then let us go up together and find it—unless you dislike me too much to endure my company for a quarter of an hour—or are too angry with me, for my impertinence just now."

"It is not worth being serious about," answered Vixen quietly, after a little pause. "I was very angry at the moment, but after all—between you and me—who were like brother and sister a few years ago, it can't matter very much. I daresay

you may have kissed me in those days, though I have forgotten all about it."

"I think I did—once or twice," admitted Rorie with laudable gravity.

"Then let your impertinence just now go down to the old account, which we will close, if you please, to-night. But," seeing him drawing nearer her with a sudden eagerness, "mind, it is never to be repeated. I could not forgive that."

"I would do much to escape your anger," said Rorie softly.

"The whole situation just now was too ridiculous," pursued Vixen, with a spurious hilarity. "A young woman wandering blindfold in a wood all alone—it must have seemed very absurd."

"It seemed very far from absurd—to me," said Rorie.

They were going slowly up the grassy hill, the short scanty herbage looking gray in the dimness. Glow-worms were beginning to shine here and there at the foot of the furze-bushes. A pale moon was rising above the broad expanse of wood and valley, which sank with gentle undulations to the

distant plains, where the young corn was growing and the cattle were grazing in a sober agricultural district. Here all was wild and beautiful—rich, yet barren.

"I'm afraid when we met last — at Lady Southminster's ball—that I forgot to congratulate you upon your engagement to your cousin," said Violet by-and-by, when they had walked a little way in perfect silence.

She was trying to carry out an old determination. She had always meant to go up to him frankly, with outstretched hand, and wish him joy. And she fancied that at the ball she had said too little. She had not let him understand that she was really glad. "Believe me, I am very glad that you should marry someone close at home—that you should widen your influence among us."

"You are very kind," answered Rorie, with exceeding coldness. "I suppose all such engagements are subjects for congratulation, from a conventional point of view. My future wife is both amiable and accomplished, as you know. I have reason to be very proud that she has done me so

great an honour as to prefer me to many worthier suitors; but I am bound to tell you—as we once before spoke of this subject, at the time of your dear father's death, and I then expressed myself somewhat strongly—I am bound to tell you that my engagement to Mabel was made to please my poor mother. It was when we were all in Italy together. My mother was dying. Mabel's goodness and devotion to her had been beyond all praise; and my heart was drawn to her by affection, by gratitude; and I knew that it would make my poor mother happy to see us irrevocably bound to each other—and so—the thing came about somehow, almost unawares, and I have every reason to be proud and happy that fate should have favoured me so far above my deserts."

"I am very glad that you are happy," said Violet gently.

After this there was a silence which lasted longer than the previous interval in their talk. They were at the top of the hill before either of them spoke.

Then Vixen laid her hand lightly upon her old playfellow's arm, and said, with extreme earnestness:

"You will go into Parliament by-and-by, no doubt, and have great influence. Do not let them spoil the Forest. Do not let horrid grinding-down economists, for the sake of saving a few pounds or gaining a few pounds, alter and destroy scenes that are so beautiful and a delight to so many. England is a rich country, is she not? Surely she can afford to keep something for her painters and her poets, and even for the humble holiday-folks who come to drink tea at Rufus's stone. Don't let our Forest be altered, Rorie. Let all things be as they were when we were children."

"All that my voice and influence can do to keep them so shall be done, Violet," he answered in tones as earnest. "I am glad that you have asked me something to-night. I am glad, with all my heart, that you have given me something to do for you. It shall be like a badge in my helmet, by-and-by, when I enter the lists. I think I shall say: 'For God and for Violet,' when I run a tilt against the economic devastators who want to clear our woods and cut off our commoners."

He bent down and kissed her hand, as in token

of knightly allegiance. He had just time to do it comfortably before Mr. and Mrs. Scobel, with the children and their master and mistress, came marching up the hill, singing, with shrill glad voices, one of the harvest-home processional hymns.

All good gifts around us
Are sent from Heaven above,
Then thank the Lord, oh thank the Lord,
For all His love.

"What a delicious night!" cried Mr. Scobel. "I think we ought all to walk home. It would be much nicer than being driven."

This he said with a lively recollection of Titmouse's performances on the journey out, and a lurking dread that he might behave a little worse on the journey home. A lively animal of that kind, going home to his stable, through the uncertain lights and shadows of woodland roads, and driven by such a charioteer as Violet Tempest, was not to be thought of without a shudder.

"I think I had better walk, in any case," said Mr. Scobel thoughtfully. "I shall be wanted to keep the children together."

"Let us all walk home," suggested Roderick. "We can go through the plantations. It will be very jolly in the moonlight. Bates can drive your pony back, Violet."

Violet hesitated.

"It's not more than four miles through the plantations," said Roderick.

"Do you think I am afraid of a long walk?"

"Of course not. You were a modern Atalanta three years ago. I don't suppose a winter in Paris and a season at Brighton have quite spoiled you."

"It shall be as you like, Mrs. Scobel," said Vixen, appealing to the Vicar's wife.

"Oh, let us walk by all means," replied Mrs. Scobel, divining her husband's feelings with respect to Titmouse.

"Then you may drive the pony home, Bates," said Violet; "and be sure you give him a good supper."

Titmouse went rattling down the hill at a pace that almost justified the Vicar's objection to him. He gave a desperate shy in the hollow at sight of a shaggy donkey, with a swollen appearance about

the head, suggestive, to the equine mind, of hob-goblins. Convulsed at this appalling spectre, Titmouse stood on end for a second or two, and then tore violently off, swinging his carriage behind him, so that the groom's figure swayed to and fro in the moonlight.

"Thank God we're not sitting behind that brute!" ejaculated the Vicar devoutly.

The pedestrians went off in the other direction, along the brow of the hill, by a long white road that crossed a wide sweep of heathy country, brown ridges and dark hollows, distant groups of firs standing black against the moonlit sky, here and there a solitary yew that looked as if it were haunted—just such a landscape as that Scottish heath upon which Macbeth met the three weird women at set of sun, when the battle was lost and won. Vixen and Rorie led the way; the procession of school-children followed, singing hymns as they went with a vocal power that gave no token of diminution.

"Their singing is very melodious when the sharp edge is taken off by distance," said Rorie;

and he and Violet walked at a pace which soon left the children a good way behind them.

Mellowed by a quarter of a mile or so of intervening space, the music lent a charm to the tranquil, perfumed night.

By-and-by they came to the gate of an enclosure which covered a large extent of ground, and through which there was a near way to Beechdale and the Abbey House. They walked along a grassy track through a plantation of young pines—a track which led them down into a green and mossy bottom, where the trees were old and beautiful, and the shadows fell darker. The tall beech-trunks shone like silver, or like wonderful frozen trees in some region of eternal ice and snow. It was a wilderness in which a stranger would incontinently lose himself; but every foot of the way was familiar to Vixen and Rorie. They had followed the hounds by these green ways, and ridden and rambled here in all seasons.

For some time they walked almost in silence, enjoying the beauty of the night, the stillness only broken by the distant chorus of children

singing their pious strains—old hymn-tunes that Violet had known and loved all her life.

"Doesn't it almost seem as if our old childish days had come back?" said Roderick by-and-by. "Don't you feel as if you were a little girl again, Vixen, going for a ramble with me—fern-hunting or primrose-gathering?"

"No," answered Vixen firmly. "Nothing can ever bring the past back for me. I shall never forget that I had a father—the best and dearest—and that I have lost him."

"Dear Violet," Roderick began, very gently, "life cannot be made up of mourning for the dead. We may keep their images enshrined in our hearts for ever, but we must not shut our youth from the sunshine. Think how few years of youth God gives us; and if we waste those upon vain sorrow——"

"No one can say that I have wasted my youth, or shut myself from the sunshine. I go to kettle-drums and dancing-parties. My mother and I have taken pains to let the world see how happy we can be without papa."

"The dear old Squire," said Rorie tenderly; "I think he loved me."

"I am sure he did," answered Vixen.

"Well, you and I seem to have entered upon a new life since last we rode through these woods together. I daresay you are right, and that it is not possible to fancy oneself back in the past, even for a moment. Consciousness of the present hangs so heavily upon us."

"Yes," assented Vixen.

They had come to the end of the enclosure, and stood leaning against a gate, waiting for the arrival of the children.

"And after all, perhaps, it is better to live in the present, and look back at the past, as at an old picture which we shall sooner or later turn with its face to the wall."

"I like best to think of my old self as if it were someone else," said Violet. "I know there was a little girl whom her father called Vixen, who used to ride after the hounds, and roam about the Forest on her pony; and who was herself almost as wild as the Forest ponies. But I can't associate her with

this present me," concluded Violet, pointing to herself with a half-scornful gesture.

"And which is the better, do you think," asked Rorie, "the wild Violet of the past, or the elegant exotic of the present?"

"I know which was the happier."

"Ah," sighed Rorie, "happiness is a habit we outgrow when we get out of our teens. But you, at nineteen, ought to have a year or so to the good."

The children came in sight, tramping along the rutty green walk, singing lustily, Mr. Scobel walking at their head, and swinging his stick in time with the tuneful choir.

"He only is the Maker
Of all things near and far;
He paints the wayside flower,
He lights the evening star."

END OF VOL. I.

BOUND
BY
LEIGHTON
SON AND
HODGE

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